WESTERN Adventures

DEC. '41

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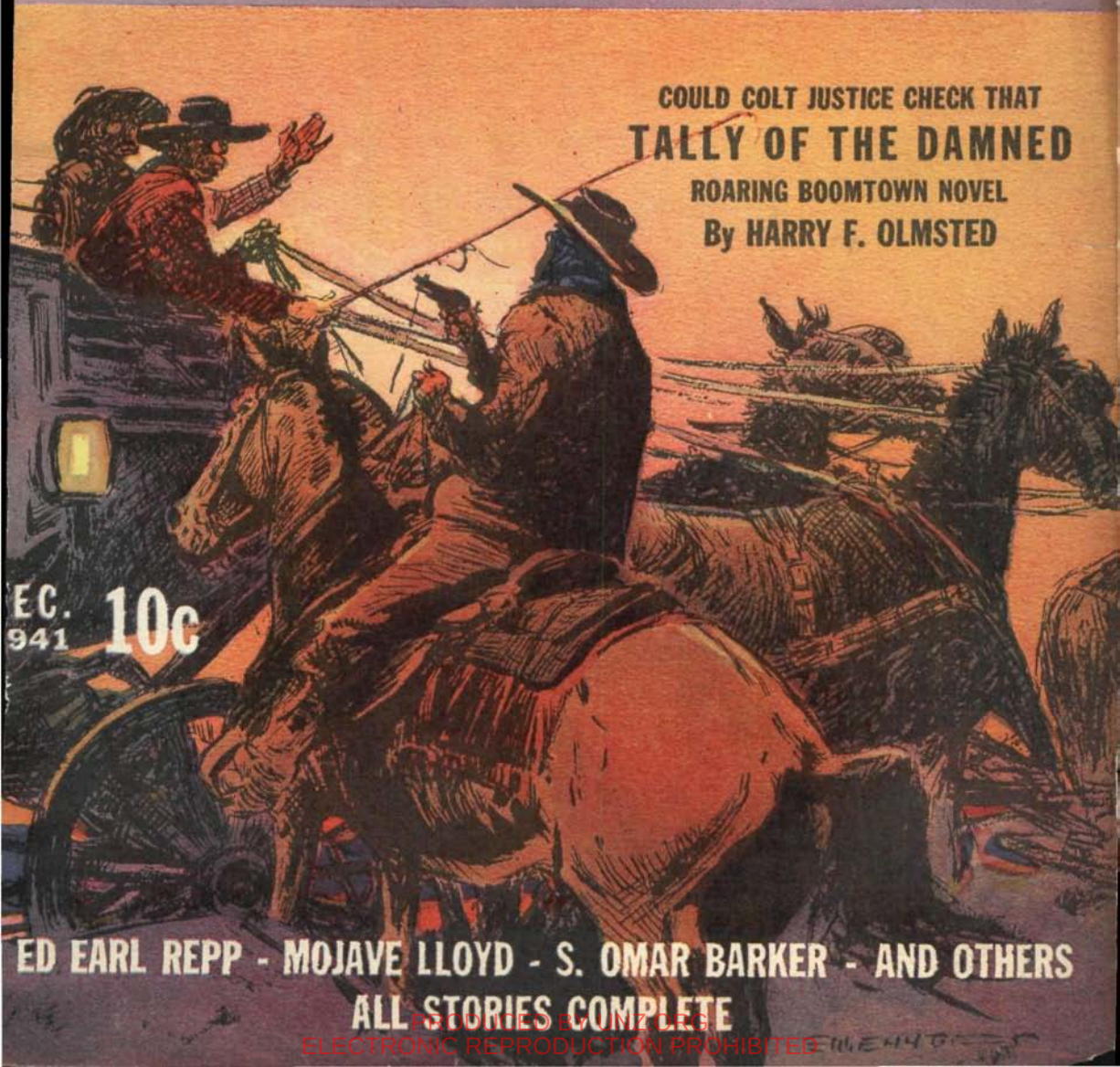

COULD COLT JUSTICE CHECK THAT

TALLY OF THE DAMNED

ROARING BOOMTOWN NOVEL

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

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ED EARL REPP - MOJAVE LLOYD - S. OMAR BARKER - AND OTHERS

ALL STORIES COMPLETE

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(Signed) Ballard Dean"

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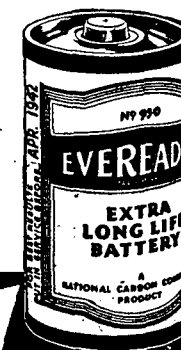

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WESTERN Adventures

CONTENTS DECEMBER, 1941 VOL. II, NO. 2

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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The Home Corral

HARRY F. OLMSTED, whose new novel, "Tally of the Damned," appears on page 9, is one writing hombre who is as much at home spinning yarns of a salty timber hog's white-water adventures as he is at turning out tales of the early untamed West. We thought you'd like to know how he got all his "savvy," so we're letting him tell his own story:

I was born in California, right beside the Old Butterfield Stage Line that carried the shorthorns west to outsmart the *Californianos*. My dad came West locating the trail for the steel rails and stayed on to play his full part in the development of the Golden State until his death at the age of eighty-one.

As a button, I hung around schoolhouses until the geese started north, then I dusted out with my dad to hold the rod, drag the chain and measure water on engineering projects. At nine, I was drawing down a dollar a day and beans from Uncle Sam and spending my spare time with cowboys, prospectors, Mexicans and Injuns.

Engineering took me far afield. Learned Arizona and its history, forward and back. Crossed the trails of Blackjack Ketchum, Butch Cassidy, Geronimo, Wyatt Earp and King Woolsey. Retraced the events of the Tonto Basin War while construction engineer on the Roosevelt Dam.

Dragging my picket pin, I drifted into New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Washington, Oregon and Nevada, soaking up the things men read about, but never once suspicioning I would write. Probed into the life of that little misanthropist, Billy the Kid. Collected unsynchronized material involving those amazing human coyotes, the Wild Bunch. Stuffed my subconscious files with yarns about lawman and outlaw, cowboy and Indian, feuds, range wars and the westward march of an empire. Then circumstances brought me back to California, with the incurable itch to express the things that had become a part of me. That was in 1921, but it wasn't until 1928 that I sold my first two stories.

The first quivers of the earthquake that sent a nation tumbling into a depression left me out of work. But it is an ill wind, indeed, that blows no one good. For one thing at least I can thank the depression. It shoved me helter skelter into the most enjoyable, the most abominable, the most fascinating and goat-getting business in the world, the fiction business. May I never fail to be as good to it as it has been to me!

Sorry our space is so limited this time, but from a full mailbag we simply had to include these words of praise from one of our junior members, David C. Sparks, of Ariel, Washington, who is only fourteen years old.

Just a few lines to tell you how swell your mag is. The two best stories you have published are "Back Trail to Cheyenne," by Ed Earl Repp, and "Beef for Border Raiders," by Walker Tompkins. Tompkins has been a favorite of mine since 1934.

If we were Walker Tompkins, we'd feel pretty cocky at being praised so highly by a reader who began to enjoy Western fiction at the tender age of seven. We're hoping that one of these days David will be writing us that W. A. is his favorite magazine, too—or was that understood?

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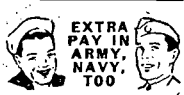

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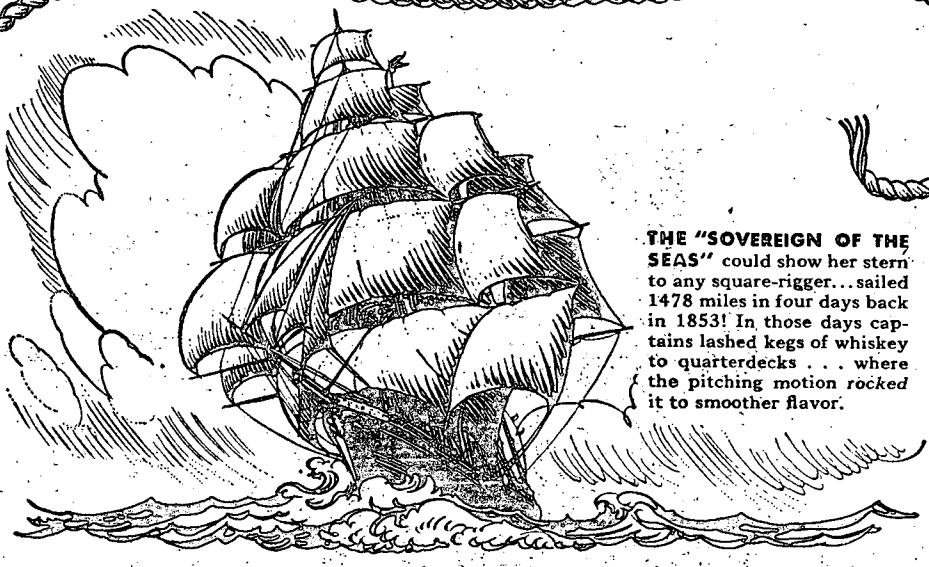

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Clem's Barbary Coast past caught up with him fast in the office of the Stampede Saloon!

It was Christmas Eve in the hell-roaring camp of Dorado but Clem Freeman, trouble-taming gold seeker, knew there could be no peace on earth while a savage, murdering band of killers took their

TALLY OF THE DAMNED

BY HARRY F. OLMSTED

CHAPTER I

GOLD RUSH

LIKE moths streaking toward a flame, men choked roads and trails and untracked desert distances in their mad dash toward the newest discovery—Dorado. Tonapah had fired men's passions. Goldfield had fanned the flame. Bullfrog, Rhyolite, Beatty, Searchlight, each had further whetted men's lust for gold.

Across the towering Sierras and into the waterless Amargosa Desert poured a human tide, on horseback, in carriages and afoot. Mining men, gamblers, tenderfoots, good women and harlots. All caught in the whirlwind of excitement, all scorning the warnings of a weary, bitter, disillusioned legion plugging back.

"Turn back! Good ground is all

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taken up and miners hold their claims with guns. Dorado swarms with thieves and cutthroats. There's no law but the Regulators—night-riding claim jumpers. Turn back, you fools!"

By way of answers, they got jeers. For the hope of a stampeder is robust, discounting discomfort, danger and odds until it is slain on the altar of failure. Nobody turned back and least discouraged by the dismal gospel of busted boomers was big Clem Freeman, whose life had been spent answering the call of adventure.

Clem had been born in Tombstone, in the gun echoes of the O K Corral, and his earliest recollections were of columns of hard-riding troopers and rumors of Apache raids. At fifteen he went to Alaska with his father, a mining engineer. The elder Freeman died on a snow-packed barrier range but Clem toughed out that awful winter and came out with—experience. He was stranded in San Francisco, enlisted in the Marines, fought in the Boxer Rebellion and was honorably discharged at nineteen. Goldfield called him then and he joined the rush. He staked a claim, sold it for ten thousand, bet the wad next day on Bat Nelson and rode a side-door Pullman back to San Francisco —broke. After that, for four years, he wore a badge of the San Francisco police, walking a beat on the Barbary Coast, saving his money.

Clem had little real hope when he grubstaked Martin Riggs, a miner. But six months later, the letter came. It said:

Dear Clem:

Swap your flat cop shoes for hobnailed boots. Cockney Jack, a desert rat, has made a strike in Quartzite Canyon. I've got two claims for us, slap dab against his. Plenty excitement in Dorado. Follow the Amargosa River to the Yellow Pipe Hills. You'll hear us whooping ten mile off. Fetch me some boots, size ten, and a .30-30. Way the scum rolls in I'll soon need a persuader. See you soon. Martin Riggs.

With a good horse between his knees and a pack mule trailing, Clem took leave of San Francisco, crossed the Sierras and spent a night in Goldfield, looking for his friends of five years ago. They were few. Bill Birney, the lawyer who had bought Clem's claim, was in Reno and mentioned for Congress. Tom McBain, blacksmith whose anvil had rung the hours, was dead. Pat Riley and his Bridget still ran their restaurant and had not forgotten Clem. Of the others he had known there was no word and he had his first realization of life's swift gallop.

Goldfield milled with boomers, headed south. And the road beyond proved to be choked with them. As he passed them up, Clem found himself pitying them. Those returning were shy the precious something which lifts man above the animals. And those hoping to stake rich claims were doomed to defeat, for they were too late. Pressing his animals, Clem made time, passing hundreds of slower outfits. Then he hit the jam behind the breakdown in the narrow waist of Pahute Pass. Traffic was jammed as Clem rode around buggies and surreys, sprung-wheeled wagons loaded with baggage and great freight outfits piled high with lumber, cement and machine parts.

ANGRY queries ran up along the stalled line, questions nobody could answer. Clem skirted it all, using the narrow shoulder of the bad roadway, and found the reason in the hundred-yard-long cut at the summit. Here a mule lay dead in its traces. An old lady sat on the

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overloaded spring wagon, looking frightened and a little bewildered at the flood of abuse coming from behind.

"Good lands, Ezra, what are we going to do?" she cried. "We're holding everybody up."

The shrunken gray-haired man standing at the head of the fallen mule straightened, cast troubled eyes down the back trail and mopped sweat from his forehead. "Pay no attention to their hollerin', Amanda. Their stock needs a rest, anyway, an' it may be a long one. This brute's dying an' where can a man get another?"

"What's the matter with him?" Clem Freeman swung down and walked to the fallen beast.

In the midst of a tumult of abuse, the old man perked up at the sound of one kindly voice.

"He's been a-bloatin' all day," he explained. "Staked him out last night an' reckon he must have et some poison bush. He's down an' I reckon he ain't gonna get up."

"Not him," said Clem. "He's as good as dead right now. And you've about as much chance of getting another animal as of wishing yourselves in Dorado. I'll give you a hand getting him out of that harness and rolling the wagon out of the pass and off the road."

"Land sakes, mister," protested the woman. "What are we going to do, just set beside the road an' dry up? We ain't got much water. An' Obee holding his breath waitin' for us to git to Dorado with his tools an' possibles."

"Obee?"

"Obee Caxton, our boy. He's struck it on his claim." The old lady smiled her pride.

"Full half mile from the discovery claim," explained the man. "But he's got pay dirt, an' it starts right at grass roots."

"Hey, you!" The call, strong and mandatory, came from the box of a bright new private coach drawn by two spanking sorrels and driven by a man in livery. Another stony-faced, uniformed man sat beside the driver, who had detoured behind Clem on the narrowing shoulder and now found himself pinched off, stalled. "What's the idea of blocking the road? Get that wreck out of there so a man can pass."

The tone of the order was more abusive than the profane plaints of those behind. It angered Clem, and his eyes grew hard and cold as he regarded the pair on the box. "We can get along fine without your two bits' worth, my friend," he said. "You'll get through when your turn comes."

The glass window of the coach came down and Clem had a vision of a feminine face which might have been lovely save for its hardness and expression of anger. And behind that face was another—that of a full-jowled man with cynically smiling lips and black, snapping eyes. Then Clem's attention was wrested from this pair by the snarling retort of the groom on the box.

"Oh, so you're making it your business, are you, young fellow? I was talking to the owner of that wagon, but if you're speaking for them you can take the consequences. Get that mess out of the road or you'll soon learn who you're holding up."

Clem's anger grew. "I know who he is," he shouted, so that his voice would strike into the coach. "He's Toles Jackman, of the Nob Hill Jackmans. Stockbroker, financier, swindler of widows and orphans with his slimy promotions, and good-time Charley of the Barbary Coast.

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And with him is Ida Redfern, darling of San Francisco's night hunters and one gold digger who don't have to go to the mines to strike pay dirt. Tell them to be patient, because their names don't mean a thing in this man's desert."

"Who's that?" Clem heard Jackman say.

And Ida Redfern spoke caustically in answer. "It's Freeman, that good-looking cop from the coast. What's he doing here?"

"He's holding me up, that's what." Jackman's voice lifted. "Gunboat, knock the fellow out of the way and then move that dead animal. I don't aim to spend the night out here."

THE groom leaped down from the box and only then did Clem recognize him. He was Gunboat Bowlin, a heavyweight fighter who had enjoyed a large following and a long period of popularity in San Francisco until linked with a crooked betting ring and barred from the squared circle. Gunboat shed his fancy braid-trimmed coat, tossed it to the driver and advanced on Clem, rolling his shirt sleeves over his bulging biceps.

"You talk big, Freeman. You talked big to me once before, with a police whistle in yer teeth. Now, before I slap some sense into you, grab the hind end of that dead plug. Old man, you grab the front end. You're clearin' this road and likin' it. Come on, move!"

"Caxton," Clem said quietly, "unpack my mule and make room on your wagon for my stuff. That will get you into Dorado where I can pick it up."

"Looks like you're hard of hearin', tramp," said Bowlin, and he grinned malignantly as he slipped on brass knuckles, badge of Barbary Coast toughs. "I've always ached for one crack at that jaw of yours, some place where it wouldn't mean thirty days. Come to papa."

He came in fast and Clem had only time to yell: "Take those knucks off, you—"

Clem swerved aside then, felt the wind stirred by that deadly mace, and went half berserk with rage. As the blow missed, he swung at Gunboat's unprotected jaw, connected and fell over the pugilist as he went over backward. Bowlin's thick fingers came to his throat and his breath was in Clem's face. Clem broke free by driving his knee hard into the fighter's belly. Bowlin grunted with pain, rolled to get at his pocket and whipped out a stingy gun.

Half erect, Clem came feet first into Bowlin's chest, kicking the gun from the fighter's grasp. Clem stumbled then and fell, coming up at once as Bowlin struggled to his feet. Clem smashed into him, throwing his shoulder to Gunboat's belly, sending him crashing back and down. Gunboat's big head came up and Clem measured him, sledging him with a long, swinging blow that lifted the heavyweight across the warped shaft of Caxton's wagon. The great body arced, head down, feet down, belly up. It was a fair target and the fight was foul. Clem's boot smashed in under the short ribs with a wickedly audible impact. Gunboat cried out in wild anguish, rolled off the shaft and lay unmoving in the dusty road.

Men were coming on the run, men who had bawled encouragement to Gunboat only moments ago but who now were hailing Clem. From one of these came a warning and Clem swung to face the driver of the coach, who came at him with his whip uncoiling. When Clem turned

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the driver dropped the whip, whirled and sped back to his rig. Clem followed him with long strides, ignoring the man's shrill pleas for mercy as he moved to the window where a man and a woman stared, white-faced.

Clem flung open the door of the carriage, bent a cold, contemptuous glance at Toles Jackman. The man sat squeezed into one corner of the luxurious cushions, his eyes wide with apprehension, brittle with desperation. Looking like a hunted thing at bay, he had his hand in his pocket, leveled toward Clem. Knowing the broker had a gun in there, Clem wondered why he waited.

"Jackman," Clem said calmly, "I don't know any good about you and don't believe there's any good in you. What a snake like you is doing out in this raw-meat country is beyond me, but it bodes ill for somebody. If I was your kind of a man, I'd give you the whipping you just tried to wish on me. But I'm not."

Toles Jackman's face was drained of blood and his eyes were blazing jet. "You make a move to enter this coach," he hissed, "and I'll let you have it."

Clem's laugh was brittle. "You've got nothing in there, Jackman, that could stop me if I wanted to lay my hands on you. And once I grabbed you, you've got nothing that could shake me off before I killed you. That's the way it'll always be between us. Don't forget it."

Ida Redfern had remained pressed back hard against the cushion. Her breathing grew quicker now and she said: "I don't know where you're going, copper, or what you hope to do out in this country. But if you're hoping to settle in Dorado, you're playing the fool with talk like this. Toles Jackman is the biggest man in this desert. He's putting a million into it; he'll take millions out. Such a man should at least command the respect of a . . . a nobody."

"Madame," Clem said, bowing, "You honor me." He slammed the coach door, glanced momentarily at the ludicrous spectacle of the two-hundred-and-twenty-pound Gunboat Bowlin on his knees, both hands pressed to his belly and his contorted cheeks streaming tears. Then Clem strode over to help Ezra Caxton stow the pack mule's burden and hitch the brute between shafts.

CHAPTER II

BUZZARD CAMP

CLEM FREEMAN rode into Dorado in the dusk of the early December day. Like a great lizard crawling with vermin, the town sprawled in unplanned ugliness at the bottom of Quartzite Canyon, crossing and recrossing the dry, rocky stream bed on rickety, makeshift bridges. Rugged stone buildings, still smelling of mortar, reared up beside stained tents flapping in the breeze. Pitchy false fronts with awnings lined the inside of a sinuous, undulant boardwalk. Hundreds of crude shacks dotted the slopes, and the gulch was redolent with the smoke of countless small fires which served for heat and light as long as the scarce fuel lasted.

The street was thronged, almost impassable at places due to great freight wagons parked alongside and the constant passage of vehicles of all sorts. It was a jostling, irresponsible crowd on the walks, swelled by the sudden influx of miners from the Amalgamated Mine, men of all nations—Mexicans, Cousin Jacks, Slavs, Welshmen and

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the ubiquitous Irishmen. All reeking with earth and sweat, and raucously hungry for food, liquor and excitement.

Through this boiling traffic, Clem steered a slow, careful course. His eyes were busy reading the signs and he had about decided there were nothing but saloons and gambling halls in Dorado when he saw it—The Nevada Feed Stables. He headed toward the entrance, pausing when he noticed the posted price. Five dollars a day for a horse—in advance! For the present, he thought, that was too rich for his blood. Yet with hay and water having to be hauled all the way across the desert, not too much perhaps. He decided to put up the animal until he could see Martin Riggs and make other arrangements when a man stuck his head out the entrance with an eager question.

"Hey, wanta sell that horse, mister?"

Clem shook his head. "I don't, no, but—"

That "but" sent the man springing forward. He caught Clem's rein with a trembling hand and his pale face was torn with eagerness. "Listen, mister! Name your price and I won't quibble. I've gotta get out of this town an—"

"Two hundred dollars," said Clem, naming a price twice what he had paid. He was sorry he had not made it double that when he saw the way the fellow snapped him up.

"You've sold a horse, mister. And thanks." The man forced yellowback bills into Clem's hands. "I hope if you get in my shoes, you'll have my luck." He swung into the saddle as Clem dismounted.

"Pretty much of a hurry, ain't you?" Clem said casually.

"A man better be in a hurry when the Regulators order him out of town. My neck is plenty long now, thank you." The man put the animal in motion and galloped down Gulch Street.

Clem folded the money, pocketed it and raised his eyes to a husky, grinning young man at the edge of the walk. Clem grinned back, glanced around him and said: "So this is Dorado?"

"Thirty minutes out for supper," said the young man. "Then you'll maybe see Dorado in action."

"I can use a shot of rye," said Clem, in the easy camaraderie of the boom camps. "And I hate to drink alone. Name's Clem Freeman."

"Wick Truett," said the other, and Clem was struck with the quick, nervous power of his grip. "I can use a drink after nine hours mucking in my drift, but I can't exactly afford whiskey at a dollar a drink."

They fell into step, moving down to a long tent structure called the Stampede Saloon. It proved to be a spacious place, thronged with men bucking the tiger and not a few drinking at the bar despite the outrageous price of liquor. Clem and his new-found companion clicked glasses and drank.

"Know your way around here?" Clem asked.

"I should. Got here and plastered my name on a claim along with the first."

"Then you should know my partner—Martin Riggs."

"Know him? Why, two of his corners are two of mine." Then Wick Truett's face darkened and his eyes narrowed. "Your pardner, eh? I recall him speakin' about you. San Francisco cop, wasn't you? Well, Freeman, you're out a pardner. This camp craves a man for breakfast every morning—an' gets him."

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"You mean?"

"Me an' my twin brother, Rick, kept preachin' to Riggs to get heeled. And he kept tellin' us you'd be here in a few days with rifles an' bullets. You didn't get here quick enough."

Clem Freeman was grinning in the hard, rash way which was his when life crowded him. "Are you trying to tell me that Martin Riggs is dead?" he asked, measuring each word.

WICK TRUETT shook his head, his eyes troubled. "I couldn't say that, Freeman." He put down his glass. "If we're going to talk, let's get out of here." He led the way outside and off the street, finally motioning Clem to a seat on the tongue of a big freight wagon. "If we keep our voices down, it should be safe to talk here. About Riggs—he an' all the rest of us got our orders from Amalgamated to get off our claims an' quit town."

"Orders from Amalgamated? Who's Amalgamated?"

"That's the discovery claim and a lot of others thrown in. A powerful—"

"Martin Riggs said the discovery claim was owned by Cockney Jack."

Wick Truett snorted. "That old desert rat! Toles Jackman bought him out for a pair of shiny boots and a barrel of whiskey. The whiskey killed him and we buried him yonder with the shiny boots on his chest."

Clem grunted. "Toles Jackman, eh? So that's what he's doing here. By what right does Jackman order men off their claims? Just the exercise of force?"

Truett was breathing hard in the darkness. Presently he said: "I wish it was only force. We could organize and fight it out with him. But he's invoking a mining law which lawyers tell us can't be beaten, a law that cost ten million dollars in legal fees, over at Virginia City. The Apex Law."

Clem shook his head. "You've got me, Wick. Never heard of the Apex Law."

"It's a Federal mining law which gives the discoverer the right to follow a vein of ore, or the dip of the fissure, right on down into the ground of any adjoining claim. There's no doubt that Amalgamated has the apex of the Dorado vein. The only doubt is that the vein is a cone, leading down under all adjoining claims. The burden of proof is on us to discredit that point, which, of course we haven't the money nor the method of doing."

"Summing it all up," said Clem, puzzled, "what's the score?"

For a moment Wick held silent. When he spoke, the rising wildness of his temper hit Clem like a blow. "Holding the lead to be a cone, Toles Jackman claimed all the gold in Dorado and ordered all claimants off their claims. Some went, scared stiff of Amalgamated plug-uglies. Others decided it was a bluff and the devil only knows what's happened to them. Dutch Wiegand, a stubborn coot about a quarter mile from me, was found hanging. There was a note on him from the Regulators, warning against claim jumpers. Others just disappeared, Martin Riggs among them. Maybe he got scared and walked out. But, knowing old Martin, I'll never believe that."

"And you?" asked Clem tonelessly. "What about you and your brother?"

"We're standing pat, Freeman. We work one shift and each stand a five-hour guard—with a cocked rifle. We've just been praying the

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Regulators would come over to throw us out. A lot of 'em will never live to see it."

"Looks to me," said Clem, after a long silence, "like the Regulators would be protecting the little fellow against a man like Jackman."

"Not Regulators paid by Amalgamated. Or killers brought in by Amalgamated to do away with trouble makers. Jackman don't want a legal battle. Court action could hold up activity here for ten or twenty years. The Regulators are Jackman's insurance against a costly lawsuit. How about you, Freeman? You've got a claim over here near mine. But you're biting off a bait of grief if you take hold of it."

"I like that kind of grief," Clem said grimly. "My stuff will be here tomorrow and I'll locate the claim and throw up some sort of a shack and—"

"I can save you that," said Wick. "Rick an' me will be more'n proud to have you bunk in with us an' share potluck. Glad of a chance to have another fightin' man within call. If we can get as many as ten good riflemen, we'll make short work of them cowardly Regulators and get out a stake before Jackman can have us stopped by law."

"That's white of you," said Clem hesitantly. "But—"

"Come on," said Wick, rising. "Sleeping room comes mighty high in Dorado. We got a bed that ain't working. Boy, will Rick be glad of another man that won't knuckle to the Amalgamated."

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TRUETT led the way along the contour of the hill, passing a number of shacks in the early darkness. Presently, with Clem at his heels, he rounded a point and pointed to a light ahead.

"There's home, Freeman. We call her the Prosperity Mine. A joke, eh?"

"I hope it means that, at least," said Clem. "But what do you gents do? Stand guard in the house, with the lamp going and the window uncovered?"

Wick chuckled. "A blind. Rick's up yonder at the mouth of the tunnel. The feller you see setting in the house, that's a dummy. All we ask is a fair shot at the man who starts shootin' through that window."

A human figure crossed swiftly between them and the light. Clem said: "That must be your brother now."

Wick had halted and his fingers dug into Clem's biceps. "Wait, Freeman! That wasn't Rick. Now who—"

"Who's that?" The low challenge came from straight ahead, though no one was visible. "Sing out, you two."

"Down!" whispered Wick, and he and Clem hunkered.

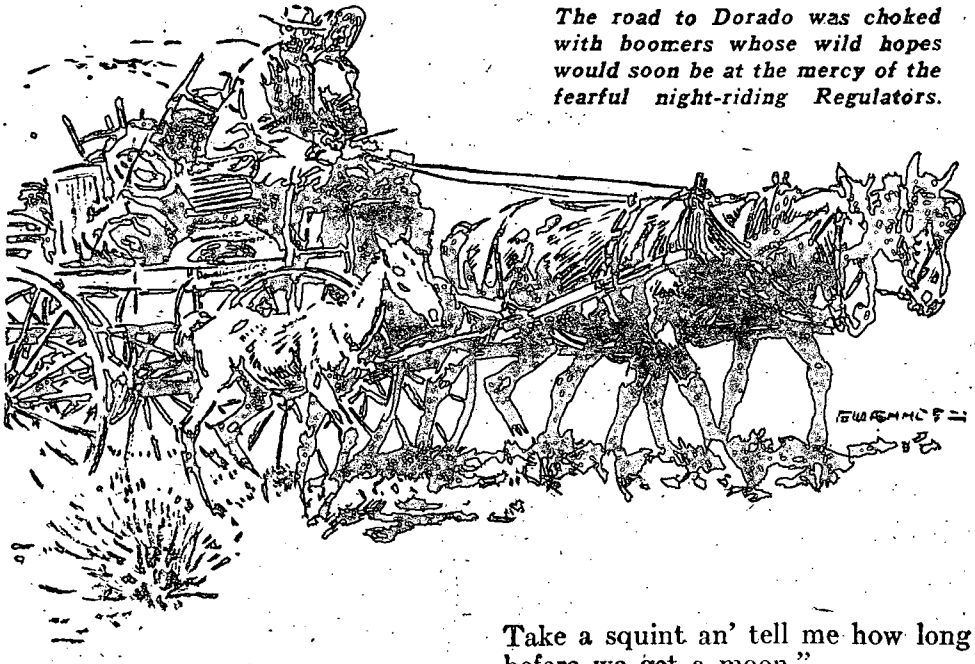
From up the hill a piece came a repressed taunt. "You're getting jittery, Tom. Keep your trap shut until the shootin' starts. Then do your stuff an' do it thorough."

"There's two fellers squattin' back there a piece."

"You're crazy. Can you see the east sky from where you're at? Take a squint an' tell me how long before we get a moon."

"What in blazes do I know about the sky and the moon? I tell you—"

"I heard you, Tom. Forget it. At first your nerves play you tricks thataway, but you soon get over it.



The road to Dorado was choked with boomers whose wild hopes would soon be at the mercy of the fearful night-riding Regulators.

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Now about the moon; if you'd spent your life under it, like me—"

The words were torn from the hidden man's lips by the sudden, reverberating gunshot. The lick of the muzzle flame split the darkness by the scarp, higher up, and a wild call sheered through the echoes. "Got him, by Satan! Got the murdering sidewinder!"

Murmurs of satisfaction sounded all along that rugged hill front and men were rising, stirring rivulets of stones and gravel as they moved upward. Where they crouched, Wick Truett's hard grip fell away from Clem's arm. A half moan escaped his lips and the night gave back the click of his cocking pistol.

"Rick!" he yelled, as he surged up. "Blast the sneakin' sons! Coming up to help you, kid!"

He was running swiftly up the slant, shooting as he ran. And flower points of gun flame were blossoming, licking toward him. Clem Freeman never hesitated. No doubt was in him as he followed Wick into battle. Here the threat was lost in the call to adventure and profit. Wick's fight was his fight, and the fight of every small miner and independent claim holder in the gulch. A wild game for wild spirits.

CHAPTER III

HAND OF THE REGULATORS

LEAD zinged at Clem as he leaped upward and the service pistol which had thundered its answer to lawlessness on the Barbary Coast roared a prolonged and staccato answer to this usurpation of the law. Figures wavered bewilderingly in the gloom and Clem summoned all his intelligence to separate the real threats from the visionary kind his stimulated senses evoked. Then Wick was somewhere up there, desperation driving him at a faster pace.

The shadow of a man upheaved before Clem and a blatant curse sounded before the thunder of a gun blast drowned it out. The flash blinded Clem. Powder stung his cheek as he threw his piece level and tripped the hammer. His assailant went over backward, muttered a few incoherent words and rolled to his stomach, never moving again.

Clem leaped over the body and lanced straight ahead, throwing shots right and left. The fierce advance of two blazing guns, each taking its toll, was too much for those night raiders and they were giving ground, drawing aside. And so Clem darted into the gloomy maw of the tunnel mouth, there to find Wick Truett kneeling beside his fallen brother.

"Freeman," said Clem, playing it safe.

"Oh, you, Clem. Rick's hard hit, but thank God he's alive. Gotta get him out of here. There's no water and he's gonna need it. I'll shoulder him and you cover me as we go out. Will you?"

"Whatever you say, Wick."

"I . . . I must've dozed off, lookin' over my sights," said a weak voice. "Sorry I had to mess it up, kid."

"Forget it," choked Wick. "Now put your arms around my neck. That's it. Now clasp your fingers. Hurting you, am I? Grit your teeth, kid. There now." Wick was on his feet, cradling his twin brother in his arms. "Clem, take my gun. Now—out we go before the full strength of the Regulators gets here. It's them, of course."

He ducked out the front, Clem following. They swerved hard right, rimming the hill on the level. Voices were shouting to one another on the slope. Men were moving about, taking stock of their losses, licking

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their wounds. The escape of the Truetts was soon known to them all and they stumbled along, firing wildly but making little progress in closing the gap bridged by Clem's bullets.

Wick walked swiftly and strongly, as if the darkness was no barrier to him. Around a few points and indentations, slowly climbing, the way led into a canyon. And once its arms infolded them, Wick breathed a sigh of relief.

"They'll never follow us here, Clem. Not unless they know the trail. Keep close behind me, fingers on my back. Lift your feet high. Half a mile more and we'll be set."

That trail was a goat path, winding and narrow. It led gradually to the skyline and over into a broken maze of canyons. The way led sharply down and Clem noticed that Wick was stumbling.

"Let me take him, Wick," he said.

"We're there now," Truett said and presently turned aside, stooped and went into an opening Clem couldn't even see. The man had eyes like a cat.

"It's a cave me an' Rick found when we was prospectin' the Yellow Pipe Hills," Wick explained. "A little seep back here runs about a gallon in twenty-four hours. Or did. Saved our lives, that bit of a spring. And the birds showed it to us. Remember, Rick?"

No answer came from his stricken twin. With feverishly hurried fingers, Wick made a fire with brush wood stacked there. The flame pushed back the blackness and they looked at the wounded man. Wounded once, but dead now. Clem knew it the moment he saw that waxlike pallor. Wick knew it, too, but he wouldn't believe it. He shook the dead boy. He brought the can they had left under the seep at the back of the cave, sprinkled water on the gray face. He called his brother's name—commandingly, pleadingly, then in desperation.

After a while the sharp edge of his grief wore dull and he dragged himself to his feet. "Well, Freeman," he choked, and Clem had never heard such hate in a voice. "You know what I meant now about Dorado. Rick an' me, we ain't been apart in our lives until now. May not be apart long now, 'cause I'm going after the skunks that did this! Sit tight till I get back."

He picked up the body then and carried it outside. For a few seconds Clem could hear the faint sounds of his boots in the gravelly soil, then silence. A half-hour later Wick was back, dry-eyed and grim. He didn't say what he had done with his brother's body, then or thereafter. Nor did Clem ever ask.

"We'll make this our headquarters, Clem," he said. "They won't be apt to find us over here, even if they had the nerve to get outside Dorado. We gotta whittle on 'em, knock 'em over one by one until they get the fear of hell throwed into them an' light a shuck out of these diggings. First, though, let's go over and fetch back bedding and grub and a few pots to cook in."

"They'll expect you back and be laying for you," warned Clem. "You stay here, where you're safe. They don't know me. I'll go down to town and wait to go into your shack till I know it's not watched. Beside, the Caxtons will be getting in and I want to meet them and collect my stuff."

"Obee Caxton's folks?"

"Yeah." Something in Wick's tone caused Clem to catch his breath. "Don't tell me that Obee Caxton is—"

"I don't know," Wick said heavily.

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"I haven't seen him for better'n a week. He's right up against the discovery claim and you can bet they have had the pressure on him good and plenty. My guess is they'll never see him again."

Clem Freeman was thinking about that prophecy as he trudged over the hill and down into the roistering, fabulous night life of Dorado. He was thinking, too, of what the night raiders had done to Wick Truett, leaving scars that would never quite heal. A picture of Martin Riggs came to him, as he had last seen the wiry, bandy-legged little prospector in San Francisco. The whole force of the odds arrayed against him in this boom camp hit him a cruel blow and Clem knew he would be forced out, and before many suns had risen and set. Forced out—or dead.

"It isn't what I've lost," he thought bitterly, "because I'm young and can fight my way back. But how can I walk out of here with a whole skin without being forever ashamed that I left all this to the dirty skunk responsible for murder and robbery and worse hurts that will never heal? Better that I dropped making an honest try at him."

Gulch Street was seething with revelry, raw and unlicensed. But underneath the glitter of it, behind its unfailing lure, Clem saw want and suffering, desperation, in the eyes of many a quiet, skulking man. He kept on down the gulch, unrecognized and unrecognizing, until he came to the lower border of the mushrooming settlement. And there he met the Caxtons, urging the plodding mule on with a strange mixture of eagerness and near exhaustion.

"My lands," cried Amanda, and her work-hardened hand came out to pat Clem's cheek. "We're most mortal glad to see ye, Mr. Freeman. Pa was gettin' scairt we'd never find Obee at night, and in all this confusion. Listen to it? Land sakes. It sounds like Sodom and Gomorrah. Can you tell us where Obee's claim is, Mr. Freeman?"

"It's up in here." Clem gestured toward the Amalgamated. "And the trail's too bad to think about getting up there tonight. I'll tell you; we'll pull off into one of these draws and make your beds. Then we'll go uptown for supper, how's that?"

"We're not aimin' to bother you, Freeman," Caxton said. "You've done a heap more for us now than anybody else would have done. But if you could get Obee an' let him know we're here—"

"Don't forget claim jumpers," Clem reminded them. "Nobody leaves his claim at night unless he figgers to lose it. Come morning we'll look up Obee, but now you need food an' rest an' I'd like to pack my mule and take my stuff to the claim. Turn him right off here."

He found them a tiny flat where high water had left a little patch of sand. And, over their protests, he unloaded their effects and helped lay their bed in the wagon. Afterward, he walked them downtown and bought a meal that cost him twenty-one dollars for the three of them.

"An everlastin' sin, I call it," Amanda said indignantly. "The Lord never intended man to put up no such price fer vittles. It's sinful—plumb sinful."

"Which is pore thanks fer Mr. Freeman, ma. When we're rich, we'll pay up."

Improvement of his own feelings and increased vigor of their steps was thanks enough and Clem resolutely shut out depressing thoughts

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of the morrow when these trusting people were due to be hurt and disillusioned. Pay him back when they got rich! All their riches would be memories of a dutiful son who had lit their hopes of an unworried old age only to vanish.

Back at the wagon, the Caxtons piled the load so as to afford themselves a degree of privacy. Then Clem packed his mule, bade them good night and struck out for the cave. At the mouth of the canyon, where he and Wick had escaped the Regulators, he tied the mule to a stunted ironwood and crept back to where he could see the Truett cabin. The moon had come up, buttering the hillside with spots of light and shadow. A wind, chill and heady, whipped in rowdyishly from over the peaks. A screech owl shrilled and the sound of it made an alarming echo that cut through the drone rising from the town.

On a slight rise, Clem lay flat on his stomach, watching the slope giving to the shack. He could see nothing but a few waving fronds of the sparse desert brush. But the sense of threat was keen enough in him to induce patience. And patience was at last rewarded. Somewhere a low voice said: "What the devil—he ain't comin' back here if he's got an ounce of brains. I'm havin' a smoke."

"Nix on that," said a man in an entirely different quarter. "You know what will happen if the chief finds out."

Silence after that, with the prickling sweat starting through Clem's pores despite the chill. This was grim war, a stark, savage game of find and kill with neither quarter nor mercy. Clem lingered a bit, hoping the men would talk again and perhaps reveal the identity of their "chief." But silence continued to reign and he began to grow stiff with the deepening cold. So he backed silently out, found his mule and crossed the divide to the cave. There, instead of his anticipated satisfaction in telling Wick what he had missed, Clem had only the unpleasant experience of finding the cave empty. Wick, more than half crazed by the murder of his twin, was out in the unfriendly night, on the prowl for vengeance!

CHAPTER IV

DANGEROUS BUSINESS

WICK came back to the cave at the crack of dawn, waking Clem out of a troubled sleep. He was haggard and his eyes were wild. There were stains on his clothes which were probably blood. All he would say was: "You were right, Clem. They had a ring around the shack all night. I couldn't get my stuff." Then he curled up on the floor of the cave and went instantly to sleep.

The mule brayed to indicate he was suffering for food and water. Clem took him back to town, hitting Gulch Street just as the first rays of the sun touched the higher peaks. The stableman offered a hundred dollars for the mule but Clem held out for more, obtained the man's grudging offer of a hundred twenty-five and finally sold the animal for fifty dollars more than that to a man who happened to overhear the haggling. Only a rich man could afford to keep an animal in Dorado, with hay selling at five hundred dollars a ton and water at five dollars a barrel.

Clem felt bitterness sweep through him as he made his way down to the camp of the Caxtons. Why did he have to be the one to tell these people their son was gone, probably dead?

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His eyes were bleak as he turned into the gut where the Caxton wagon stood. And there he paused, frozen, as he found himself looking upon the joy of a family reunion. Amanda Caxton wept openly, clinging to the tall, slender, darkish young man by the wagon. And Ezra Caxton moved around them nervously, patting first one and then the other, speaking words they didn't hear. Clem stirred himself, a load lifted from his breast.

"My boy, Obee, Mr. Freeman," said the old lady proudly. "Obee, this is the man I told you about."

The two young men gripped hands and Clem liked the bullet-direct glance of Obee Caxton's cool gray eyes, the bulge of the jaw and the strong handclasp.

"Thanks for taking care of my folks," said Obee. "I hope one day to make it up to you."

"There's nothing to make up," Clem told him. "I enjoyed knowing them. But you—from all the word I could get, you had disappeared."

"Practically had. Got run off my claim, like a lot of others, and have been doing what I could to eat, hoping there'd be a break so I could go back. It's a bad town, Freeman. Maybe I can help you by telling you just how bad."

"You don't need to, Obee. I know something about it. My partner filed for me, but he's gone and nobody knows where."

"Your claim's in Amalgamated?"

"I don't know."

"Better go down to the registrar's office and see. Who was your pardner?"

"Martin Riggs."

Obee Caxton nodded. "I knew him and I've been on his claim. He told me it would take a lot of killing to move him off. I reckon it did. Me, I was outmatched and knew it. I quit and they've let me alone."

"Maybe you played it wisest," said Clem. "What about your folks?"

They talked it over. Obee was living in a dugout owned by an assayer who had gone to Carson City with an illness. When he returned, in a month or so, he would want the shack. Until then they could all live in it. Leaving Obee to move his parents, Clem sought the registrar's office—a mean, two-room affair with a counter in front and filing cases and drafting board behind.

GALT GILYAN, the registrar, was behind the counter—a lean, colorless man of about thirty-five, with a homely, not unpleasant face which wore the flush that comes out of a whiskey glass.

"What can I do for you, neighbor?" The ring was gone from Gilyan's voice, like a whiskey bottle with a crack in it.

"The name is Clem Freeman. My partner filed for me alongside the discovery. He's vanished and I can'd find him or the claim."

"You're in the right place," said Gilyan, and got out the flat record book. Neither there nor in the book of maps was there any record of a claim in Freeman or Riggs, no record of a fee. Clem was puzzled.

"How about Obee Caxton?" The registrar regarded him from under lowered brows, then his forefinger traced the record.

"Right here," he said. "He's in beside the discovery, on the south."

"And Truett?"

"Yeah. Wickland Truett—second tier west of the discovery. And Rickland Truett, adjoining him on the north."

"Funny," murmured Clem.

"Funny?" Gilyan challenged.

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"What you mean by that?"

"My filing was made; Martin Riggs wrote me so. Why ain't they in the book?"

The official swelled like a toad. "You questioning the honesty of this—"

"If the shoe fits, wear it."

"I resent that." Gilyan's face reddened. "You ain't the first boomer to be swindled by a grubstake partner, but you've no call to drag me into it. I'm very busy, so if you've nothing else—"

Clem walked out, seething. The registrar was under the shadow of Amalgamated, he felt certain. Back in the office, Gilyan watched him go. "My logical friend," he muttered, "you just signed your own death warrant."

Clem made the rounds of saloons, probing for some word of Martin Riggs, or a reason the claims should not be recorded. Some men withdrew hastily as if he had smallpox. Others advised him to keep his fly trap shut. A few, half drunk, salved their bitterness by talking. Late that evening, tired, puzzled, discouraged, Clem ate in a cheap beanery and struck out for the Caxton dugout before going over the ridge to Wick's cave. The way led off Gulch Street, up a gloomy flood gut tapping the hillside. Clem was thinking about getting to the cave before Wick embarked on another night quest for vengeance when a shadow moved before him.

For a split second Clem stood frozen, a fair target. Then he was twisting forward and aside, drawing his gun. Two shots roared out of the night, the bullets fanning Clem without touching him. But the assassin didn't fire the third shot, which came from Clem's weapon. At the report, a man came stumbling from his covert, crying his despair. His knees buckled and he spilled, rolling almost to Clem's feet.

A door slammed on the hillside. Light showed, winked out and rocks rolled as a man came leaping down the slant.

"Drop them guns, you!" he cried. "I've got you skylighted, both of you. Reach or I'll buckshot-ride you into hell!"

"Obee!" Clem felt sick at what would have happened to the youth had the fight gone the other way. "It's Clem Freeman. A fool play, kid. Learn to keep inside when guns start banging."

Obee was instantly contrite. "You're right, Clem, but I'm gonna blow up if something don't bust soon." He stumbled, felt the dead man. "Holy smokes—a body!"

"Tried to dry-gulch me," said Clem, his ear tuned to the swift approach of men from Gulch Street. "He got in the first two shots but it just wasn't his night to howl. Sounds like somebody's coming to investigate."

Obee caught his breath. "Regulators, you mean. Quick, Freeman, get out of this. Them devils won't give you a chance. A five-minute trial, a quick jerk on a rope and they'll file you on a three-by-six claim that isn't pay dirt. Hurry up! Get out of this."

"You drunken fool!" Clem's tongue lashed. "Clear out with that sob stuff or I'll let you have it. Get into the dugout and look after your folks. Keep away from me and your nose out of my business."

He heard Obee's surprised breath, watched him draw dejectedly away. The rebuke was not of Clem's choosing, but trouble lay ahead and a half-crazed man with a cocked scattergun could start hell rolling down the draw. Better hurt feelings than death.

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LANTERNS came bobbing up the crooked trail and a score of men with guns came tramping into view. "Who's that?" The leader halted the advance.

"Come on, boys," Clem called grimly. "Nothing to fear now."

They came on, guns cocked, lanterns high. "What's the matter here?" The leader squinted at Clem. "What's the shootin' about?"

"Search me," said Clem calmly. "But it was pointed at me. The deceased tried to rub out my chalk mark."

"And drawed the losin' end," said an oldster, kneeling beside the body. "Dead as a nit. Anybody know who it is?"

Nobody answered. The leader said: "Pick him up, four of you husky gents. We'll take him down for the undertaker. And you—" He eyed Clem up and down. "You better see Marshal Burgess and make a report."

Surprise ran sharply through Clem as he fell in behind them. Surprise that these men were not Regulators and surprise that Dorado should have a marshal. Down on Gulch Street they were instantly hemmed by a curious crowd. Progress became difficult and the body was laid on the walk and a call sent out for the lawman. When he came, he proved to be a pompous, banty rooster trying to act big but considerably dwarfed by Toles Jackman and Gunboat Bowlin who elbowed in behind him.

"Murder, eh?" Gard Burgess scrutinized the body. "It's Silent Dan McGue, the old swamper who mucked out the Stampede Saloon. Who killed him?"

"McGue must have turned bad, marshal," said the leader of the investigating committee. "He shot twice, point-blank at this young feller, an' missed both times."

"You?" Burgess regarded Clem hostilely. "I can't swaller that yarn. Too much killin' goin' on and I'm gonna put a stop to it. Come along, you go on ice." He reached out and Clem struck his hand down. Burgess bridled, dropped his hand to his gun and abruptly Toles Jackman stepped between them.

"None of that, Gard. It's my judgment you haven't a shred of evidence—"

"I never jail a man without evidence," broke in the marshal hotly. "Do I run this office, or not? When I taken the job, you promised there'd be no interference."

"I added further," said Jackman icily, "that you would be removed when it was to the best interest of Dorado. Hand over your badge."

The marshal complied, snarling at Clem: "And you go scot-free, after all I've done to jail these killers. You better keep out of my way."

"You better keep out of *his* way," warned Jackman. "Freeman, in downing this bushwhacker, you show the stuff we need in a marshal. The job is yours if you want it. Two hundred dollars a month."

His friendly smile was something alien to him. Gunboat had to force his bruised lips to grin. Outwardly it might seem to have a basis in logic, but underneath there was a hint of treachery, so Clem played his hunch.

"No thanks," he said. "You better get somebody without a claim. I'll be too busy."

Jackman bowed, his face a cold mask. "As you wish, Freeman. I thought you were smart enough to see that the office would be your best protection against Santee Cardigan and his Regulators."

Clem started. "Santee Cardigan?"

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"Boss of the Stampede Saloon. A gambler who won't risk his money on natural odds, not when he can get all the edge and have darkness to hide his deal. Sorry, Freeman. Come on, Gunboat."

Clem watched them buck the crowd. He felt no regret, for he was convinced in his mind that the episode had been cut and dried, well rehearsed for public consumption in case the ambush failed. This was Jackman getting even, but Cardigan and the Regulators were more important, more pressing. As he left the spot, Clem promised himself he'd find Cardigan, handle him without gloves and wring the truth from him regarding Martin Riggs and the vanished gold claims.

CHAPTER V

COLD TRAIL LANDMARKS

CLEM found the Stampede Saloon jammed with patrons, reeking with smoke, whiskey fumes and body odors. Games were running full blast. The bar was three deep and a bank of raucous men ringed the piano, roaring a ribald song. In answer to Clem's question, a percentage girl pointed out Santee Cardigan, slender, well dressed, with gaunt cheeks and black forceful eyes.

Cardigan was dealing faro and Clem left, determined to collar him tomorrow morning and call his hand. Before he had gone far toward the cave, he realized he was being followed. He led his stalker over ridges and into gulches, planning to trap him. But when he took his stand it was to find that the fellow had grown tired or cagy. And thus was lost an opportunity to gouge a little truth out of somebody.

It was late when Clem reached the cave. Wick Truett was absent, as Clem had anticipated. The fool, Clem thought, would fail to return from one of these mad night forays. Indeed, when Clem had pulled out next morning, Wick still had not shown up. It laid a heavy weight on Clem's heart.

All his attempts to see Santee Cardigan next day earned Clem only suspicion. The gambler didn't show up that night to bank his games. But late the following afternoon Clem spotted him, followed him into the Stampede, eluded the wary bouncer and walked into Cardigan's office unannounced. The gambler spun about.

"Hello," he said, sounding ill at ease. "What can I do for you?"

"Sit down!" Clem spoke mildly, yet Cardigan seemed to recognize it as an order and obeyed, holding his temper down.:

"What's the idea?"

Close up, Clem found the man hauntingly familiar. He'd probably seen him somewhere in San Francisco. "You're a hard man to see, Cardigan."

The gambler smiled. "Not usually. But a cold kept me in bed yesterday. It took my voice and kept you waiting, which makes us even. What was it you wanted?"

The man was smooth, courteous —and probably deadly, Clem decided. He said: "I'm told you know Martin Riggs."

He saw the man's start with keen pleasure. "I'll say I do. I guess I've run into him at least once in every Nevada boom camp. Why? Friend of yours?"

"Yes." Coldly. "And they say you can tell what went with him, if you will."

Cardigan's eyes narrowed. "Who told you that?"

"Never mind. I hear also that you know why Martin's claims are not on the register."

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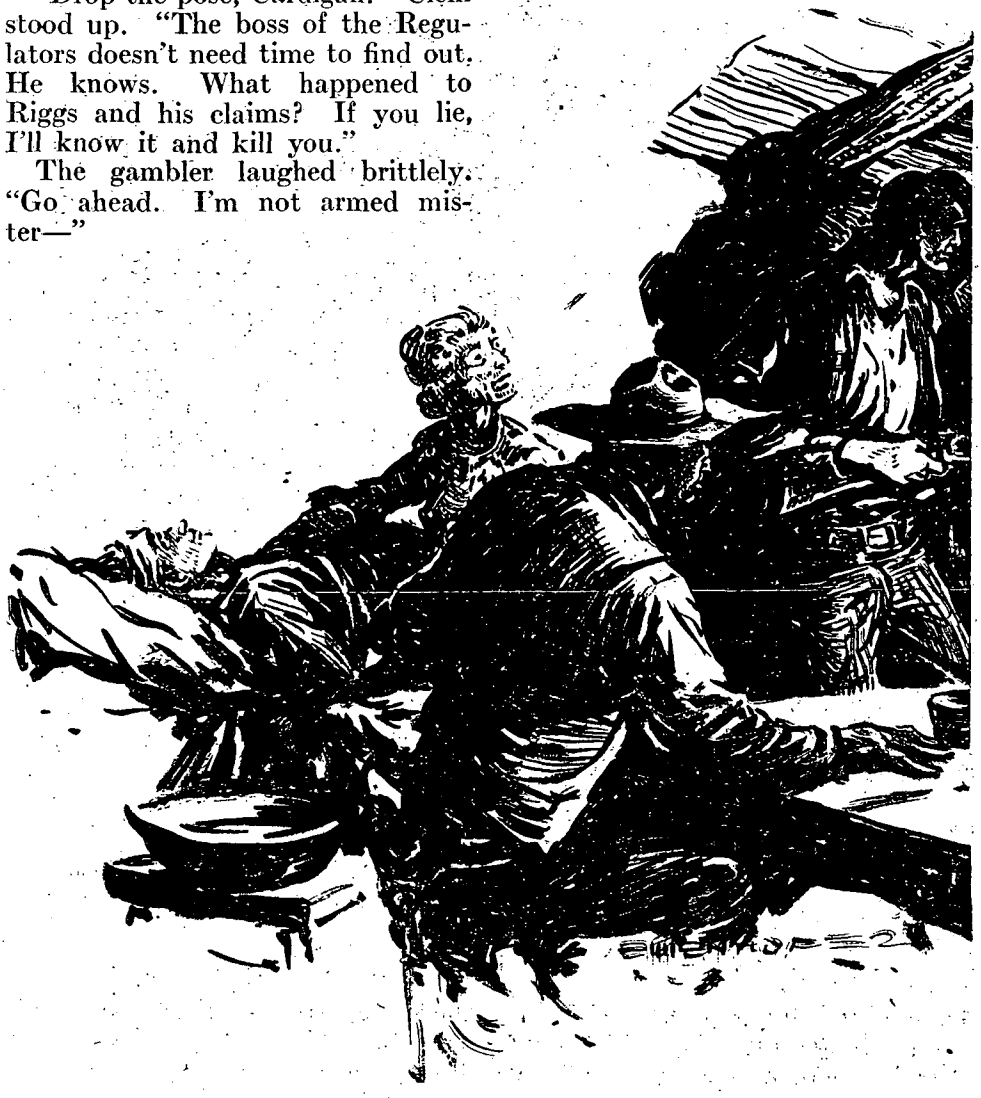
The gambler's face became a tight mask, unreadable. "Wrong on three counts, my friend. But be here at this hour tomorrow and I'll tell all I can learn."

"Drop the pose, Cardigan!" Clem stood up. "The boss of the Regulators doesn't need time to find out. He knows. What happened to Riggs and his claims? If you lie, I'll know it and kill you."

The gambler laughed brittlely. "Go ahead. I'm not armed mister—"

"You're crazy if you think I'm drunk, Cardigan."

"As you are crazy for thinking I'm head of the notorious Regulators. You heard Jackman out yon-



"Freeman. Martin Riggs' partner."

"Happy." Cardigan bowed cynically. "You're all off, Freeman. I can't answer your questions. Go home and sleep it off. And change the label."

der, and swallowed it. How do I know that? I pay to know what goes on. The only truth Jackman spoke was about Silent Dan McGue. I did give the poor bum a job. He repaid me by stealing from my till. I fired him and you're to

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"Open up!" came the order from beyond the door. "Hand Clem Freeman over or we'll come and get him!"

be admired for killing him. The camp's better off without his kind. When he shot at you from ambush, he was working for the man who doesn't want you to find what became of Martin Riggs and your claims. Find that man and we can make something of this camp."

He spoke calmly, yet with evident sincerity, and Clem was impressed. Either this man was an actor or Jackman, who had fought him, was close to the Regulators. Clem shook hands and stepped into the barroom just in time to see two toughs angle toward a slim, pale man and hustle him out the rear despite his protestations. Nor could Clem have told why he was impelled to follow them. As he slid out into the darkness, the night gave back the distinct sound of crashing blows, a faint

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cry and then the hard echoes of boot steps receding swiftly.

FOR a second Clem hesitated. "I want none of this," he muttered. Then it struck him that this weakling might as easily have been Martin Riggs. Their boldness suggested confidence in a powerful chief. Followed up, that scorn of caution might lead him to that chief. Clem hurried to the alley and found the fallen man.

There was a flicker of life in him, so Clem shouldered his meager weight, followed the dark lane behind buildings and up the winding draw to the Caxton dugout. At his knock the light went out and Obee's voice challenged: "State your business."

"Open up, Obee. It's Clem Freeman."

"My lands, Obee," Amanda protested. "What a way to treat a friend. Ezra, make a light. Obee, let Mr. Freeman in."

They stared when they saw Clem's limp and bleeding burden. The pioneer woman, long inured to frontier realism, bared her arms, issued a few orders and went to work. Obee stirred the fire from under the tea kettle while Ezra rummaged for clean rags. Clem went to town for whiskey. In an hour their patient was conscious, but weak and white. Amanda shielded him from Clem's questions.

"Time enough to talk to him in the morning. Obee, you and Clem take turns setting up with the poor boy. Does beat all how wicked a place can get. Makes an honest body shudder. Come on, pa, let's to bed. Call me if you need me, boys."

The injured man tossed and muttered through the night. But morning found him improved and grateful for the care. He needed no encouragement to talk. He was Ripton Drayne, San Francisco lawyer who had lived a hand-to-mouth existence since being disbarred on the coast. Hatred touched his sunken eyes as he told them how Toles Jackman, now the big gun of Dorado, had taken away his license to practice law.

"In law," Drayne said, "a man must avoid being too squeamish where he suspects guilt in a client. I've always tried to be reasonable, stretching a point perhaps to hold a money client like Jackman. But I rebelled when he lent my name to a rotten stock swindle. He told me the brochures were out and warned me about what would happen if I quit him. I did, and it happened."

He told of hitting Dorado in the first stampede, of doing business with men who dared not leave their claims to jumpers—filling personal needs, filing papers and looking after their legal rights in mining law. Yes, he remembered Martin Riggs, had filed him on two claims, one for a Clem Freeman in San Francisco. And he could show those claims if he didn't starve first. His business had been largely on contingency.

"Bless your heart," soothed Amanda. "You won't starve while we have food left. Obee spoke of you, wishing he'd let you file him. Thinks then he might have saved—"

"No," broke in Drayne. "I doubt I could have saved it. Those I filed close to the discovery are crushed, some dead, some missing. The claims are now in Amalgamated."

"But the filings," protested Clem. "You made 'em; didn't you see 'em entered?"

"Always, but the record is

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changed to suit the crime. The registrar's a crook, owned body and soul by Amalgamated. He doesn't dare squeak even if he wants to, knowing it would bring the Regulators. Who leads them? That's the question. Some say Santee Cardigan, boss of the Stampede Saloon. I have my doubts about that. Anyway, they warned me to get out and last night they caught up with me."

Wearied, he fell asleep. Obee glowered.

"He's dynamite," he declared. "If they learn—"

"They mustn't learn," said Clem. "Something must be done and we need his advice. In the meantime I'll go look for Wick Truett. Haven't seen him in two days."

WORRY for Wick had been gnawing at Clem. And his uneasiness proved justified. When he looked into the cave, he saw Wick lying on his pile of blankets, a woman beside him. As Clem stood there staring, the woman spoke.

"Welcome, stranger. How about whacking off the ropes this maniac tied around me? And hurry. My hands and feet are about ready to drop off. And that drip of water at the back of the cave is torture."

"Ida Redfern!" Clem went to her, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

She glared. "This lunatic came to my apartment in the Golden Fleece, looking for Toles Jackman. When I told him Toles wasn't about and wouldn't be, he said that I lied and sat down to wait. My screams brought men and this fellow shot holes through a couple of them—I don't know how bad. Then he tied me up and took me out a window. He's strong as a bull. Carried me up here with a bullet in him, then passed out. He's been like this for a day and a night."

Clem's cheeks grew dark and hard as he moved to the unconscious man and ripped off the blood-caked shirt. "I was afraid of something like this," he muttered. "You were right when you said he was crazy. The Regulators killed his twin brother and took over his claims."

"Good enough," said the queen of the Barbary Coast, tight-lipped. "They haven't killed half enough of the vermin in Dorado. You and your ideas of law—you don't know anything about a mining camp like Dorado. If it wasn't for the Regulators, life wouldn't be worth five cents. And as for the safety of a woman—"

"Jackman's given you all the arguments, hasn't he, Ida?" Clem whipped a rude bandage around the fiery wound in Wick's right side. "Well, I'm glad you made that little speech. It earns you a long stretch in this prison. I'll give you a drink and something to eat, and I'll loose your ties for ten minutes. Then I'm taking this boy down where he can have a doctor."

Ida Redfern screamed and reviled him. She threatened death for him when Jackman learned of it. She pleaded. She offered money. She declared that she would scream until someone came to release her, but from the huskiness of her voice Clem knew she had screamed herself out, without summoning aid. He told her so and she fell into a sullen silence as she ate and drank and rubbed circulation into her deadened extremities. Then Clem tied her up again, steeling himself against her tears. Shouldering Wick, he began the dangerous trip to Dorado, in the daylight.

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CHAPTER VI

CALL FROM THE STRANGLERS

THOUGH Wick was heavy and the way was beset with a thousand chances of recognition and disaster, Clem got Wick down to the Caxton dugout with no more than two instances where he had to joke with some curious person about having to lug a drunken partner home to bed. Amanda Caxton was her usual sympathetic self but her husband was plainly displeased and Obee was panicky.

"Don't look fair, you fetchin' people here this way, Freeman," Obee protested. "I strung along with you when you brought Drayne. But Wick Truett is something worse. He entered the Golden Fleece Hotel yesterday, killed one man, wounded another and kidnaped a woman. The town has been warned that he's crazy and to shoot on sight."

"Whose order?" asked Clem.

"Jackman's, I guess."

"There's your answer. His next order may affect you—or me. This boy has lost his claim, just like we have. And his twin brother, besides. We've got to hang together or we'll be hung separate."

"He's right," said Ripton Drayne, who had dressed and was sitting up, pale but improved. "You take care of Wick. I'll be leaving in an hour or so."

"Like fun you will, my young whippersnapper," said Amanda Caxton, her arms akimbo and her brown eyes snapping. "You'll go when I say you're well enough, not before. Now enough about who stays and who goes. Clem, you fetch a doctor. This boy has a bullet inside him and I can't help him till it's out."

It took Clem hours to get a doctor. There were two in Dorado. The first one he visited proved to be somewhere on the south side of the gulch, delivering a baby. The second one, he was told, had been called to the Amalgamated Mine to attend a man injured by falling rock. Though he searched diligently, Clem could find no trace of the doctor with the baby case. So he tried the Amalgamated and was stopped at the gates. There was no doctor at the mine, the guard told him, so Clem returned to town conscious that he was being followed. The sun had set below the bare, rocky ridge when he found the medico who had been patching up an accident victim. An elderly man, he was tired and hungry and eager to get to his room in the hotel. But when told it was a gunshot wound and an emergency, he agreed to attend. Clem gave him directions for reaching the Caxton home and himself took a long, roundabout way through the hills, finally losing the human bloodhound who followed him.

It was dark when Clem knocked and was admitted to the dugout. The doctor had just finished with Wick and was preparing to leave. "Keep him quiet," he ordered, "and he should get along all right. With the bullet out, the fever should drop tonight. No solid food for three days. If he turns worse, let me know."

"Like to have you look at another patient," said Clem, and glanced about. "Where is Drayne?"

"Land sakes," said Amanda. "He just suddenly riz up and 'lowed he was obliged. Then he clapped on his hat and left us. I'm right worried about the boy."

CLEM, too, was worried about the friendless lawyer, whose life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel once he was spotted and the Regu-

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lators knew he had survived their cowardly assault. But looking for him now, with night glooming the Yellow Pipe Hills, was like looking for a needle in a haystack. It was just too bad for Ripton Drayne.

Clem was telling them how he found Wick Truett, all about Ida Redfern and what had happened in the Golden Fleece. "Of course, I can't hold her in the cave," he said. "When I've taught her that there are times when she can't have her own way, I'll slip up there and cut her loose. And will she move heaven and earth then to stretch my hide—"

"Wait a minute, Freeman." Ezra Caxton darted to the pine table and blew out the light. "Somebody outside. Everybody hush."

They listened, holding their breath. The night wind whined faintly around the angles of the dugout and somewhere a coyote howled dismally.

"My lands," came Mrs. Caxton's plaint. "You men keep scaring the daylights out of a body."

And then it came.

"Hello in there. We wish you Caxtons no harm. But we can't protect you as long as you protect criminals. Turn them out!"

"And just who are you?" blazed Ezra.

"Ezra, hush up," Amanda said.

"We're the Regulators. We want Wick Truett for murder. We want Clem Freeman for obstructing justice and harboring a fugitive and accessory after the fact of kidnaping."

"They ain't here," howled Ezra.

"Possibly not. Open up your doors so we can look. If they're not here we'll let you alone. Deliver or show us you're not harboring. You have five minutes."

"You'll have to do it; folks," Clem said. "No use you facing their anger because of something I wished onto you."

Obee spat out a low curse. "Now you're talking that way. A little bit ago it was hang together or hang separate. I'm for fightin' 'em. Not a man will get in here till our shells run out. What have you got that's better?"

"This cubby is built at the point of a small ridge. There's another door, leading out to where I'll have the ridge between me and them—"

"Don't talk foolishness," snapped Obee. "They've got us surrounded."

"I don't think so. I hate to move Wick now but we can't let him be found here. Put him on my back and tie him there so I can have my gun hand free. Then when they demand to be let in, stall them until the very last. When they discover the birds have flown, I'll be in the cave. Hurry now."

They were against what they thought to be a suicide move, but Clem would have it no other way. So they tied the drowsy, muttering Wick to Clem's back, gripped his hand and let him out the back door, watching him melt into the gloom.

Clear of the dugout, Clem moved slowly and with the utmost caution. The air in the draw was oppressive, breathing of sinister shadows, ghostly presences athrob with the lust for blood. Clem had no other plan than to take a straight, strict course toward the cave, exercising due caution. If he were discovered, he meant to fight until they blasted the life from him, taking as many of the hated night questers with him as possible.

MOVING through what seemed, in his heightened imagination, to be a ring of cold steel, Clem was prey to loneliness. Greater loneliness than he had ever known. Mar-

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tin Riggs was gone. Ripton Drayne was gone. Wick hung a helpless weight upon his back. Loyalty dictated that he remain aloof from the Caxtons. He was all alone, one against a horde of thieving killers.

Common sense told him to abandon such an unequal fight. But he had a duty to perform, a duty transcending all else in his code. That duty was to be true to the partner who had risked plenty and given his all to lay claim to the riches of Quartzite Canyon, in the Yellow Pipe Hills. And such was Clem Freeman's obedience to the elemental rules of an elemental game that he did not now even debate the proposition, or admit the alternative of closing with those who had slain old Martin and robbed them both. And, finding satisfaction in that course, he pressed on, step by step, his movement raising faint echoes. The sky was laced with dim stars, the sharply rearing ridge a black line against lesser black. Every bush was a menace, every shadow, yet he pressed on, unchallenged, ready for it when it came.

And suddenly the tension ran out of him and he seemed not to think of what lay ahead. Through him ran the rhythm of the solitary desert, the call of primeval night. And somehow that call strengthened him, lessened his loneliness while he passed out of any possible widening of the Regulators' circle.

Behind him, faint and far, he heard a deep voice say: "Time's up, you Caxtons. We want Truett and Freeman." And then he dropped over a rise and he heard no more.

Unutterably weary, Clem staggered into the cave and removed the wearing burden from his shoulders. Ida Redfern was asleep and she continued to sleep while Clem made a place for Wick who breathed fast and strong, apparently none the worse for the moving. Clem was tempted to lie down, too, and rest, but the Caxtons were in trouble down there. They might need him. So over the back ridge he trudged again, his mind leaping alive at the glow of fire against the far black hillside.

Quite a crowd had gathered around the Caxton dugout when Clem got there. His inquiry brought out the information that the inmates of the smoldering dugout had incurred the wrath of the Regulators by harboring law breakers. The fugitives, he was told, had been hustled away to no one knew what fate. They were being escorted out on the desert and turned loose to hoof it out to Bullfrog, or Tonapah.

"Santee Cardigan sure has got an organization," somebody said. "When he strikes, he strikes fast and hard. Some say that him and Jackman are sure to tangle—"

"Shut up, you fool," another warned from the half darkness. "A loose tongue is a sure ticket to hell, in Dorado. Hear nothin', see nothin' an' say nothin'. That's the safe way."

But enough had been said to let Clem know that the ideas Jackman was planting about the owner of the Stampede Saloon were taking root with the rank and file of the townspeople. Maybe it was the truth. Cardigan was smooth enough to play the dual role. His spirits low, largely because of a sense of total frustration, Clem turned away, a vague idea forming in his mind. If the Caxtons returned, the cave could be home to them. All they had was hope, and it lay here, not outside. Clem entered Dorado, filled with fury, daring the Regulators or anybody else to make a play at him.

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In an eating place, he drank a half gallon of coffee laced with whiskey and felt better. He went outside again—and paused as a shuffling figure angled out to meet him.

"Hello, Freeman." It was Ripton Drayne.

CHAPTER VII

COUNTEROFFENSIVE

QUICKLY!" Clem dragged the lawyer into the shadows. "I'd given you up, Drayne. You shouldn't hang around Dorado."

"I know." Gray depression seemed to grip Drayne. "I'm too poor to buy my way out and too weak to walk out." He sighed. "Those good Caxton people, they must think I'm—"

"The Caxtons," said Clem grimly, "were bounced by the Regulators tonight, the dugout burned and the only way out a long hike across the desert. If you hadn't left, you'd be dead. Here"—he handed the lawyer twenty dollars—"eat this up."

"Thanks." Emotion threatened to overcome Drayne, but he controlled himself and pocketed the money. "You do me a favor so I'll do you one. I've watched Gilyan, believing he's near the bottom of this rotten business. He's in his office now, working with a man behind locked doors. Maybe it's something—"

"Yes," said Clem, his weariness ebbing. "Come in here."

He drew Drayne into the restaurant, pulled the curtains of a booth and for half an hour watched the half-starved man wolf food. When they left, Drayne's step was surer and his cheeks had spots of color. Following the shadows, they came to Galt Gilyan's office, found the blinds drawn and the door locked.

"This won't be nice, Drayne," Clem said, "so you stand near that window. If I get what I want, I'll pass it out to you and meet you later under the loading platform of the Nevada Hardware."

Drayne was trembling as he took his post. Clem backed off for a running dive at the door, hit it shoulder-on and took it off its hinges. Scrambling inside, he vaulted the counter and smashed through the inner panel with drawn gun. Galt Gilyan was twisted in his chair, his jaw sagging. Across from him, Toles Jackman was coming up. A draftsman sat with poised pen, his eyes fearful.

"Easy, boys," said Clem, and glanced at the sheets pinned to the table top. "Crude work and dirty. Pull the thumb tacks, boy, roll them up and hand them over."

"What is this?" demanded Gilyan, rising.

"Robbery, you fool!" Jackman snapped. "Punishable by death in Dorado."

"Per strangler law," retorted Clem.

"You're crazy," said Jackman.

"Maybeso," conceded Clem. "Come on, draftsman, roll those sheets."

"You do, Corey," warned Gilyan, "and it's your neck."

Clem swayed forward, shifting his gun to his left hand. Gilyan shrank, but the table blocked retreat. He dug at a table drawer, got it half open when Clem hit him, smashing him to the floor. A leaden paperweight fell beside him and his fingers closed about it. Clem, fully aroused, stamped down on the wrist and kicked the missile across the room. He realized his mistake as he swung his glance to Jackman's leveled .45.

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"Drop it, Freeman!" The broker was laughing. "The end of another flat foot."

"Everybody dies," said Clem. "I'll take mine shooting. You can't down me without taking lead yourself, Jackman. Fact is, you won't shoot, because I'm the only one who knows where Ida is tied up. If I die, she dies."

Jackman laughed. "If that wasn't a bluff, it'd still be funny. Why should I trade on Ida Redfern? There are plenty of her kind. Now let's see if a .45 slug will stop you." He stiffened; his lips flattened and his eyes hooded with murder lust. Behind Clem a hinge squealed. Believing it Drayne, he groaned. And then the cool, feminine voice spoke from the doorway.

WE'LL postpone the experiment, Toles. Drop the pistol, you rat. That's it. So little Ida don't mean a thing any more? Gilyan, lie still or I'll kill you. And you"—she threatened the draftsman—"hand those sheets to Freeman as he ordered. Freeman, take what you want and get out. You'll have about five minutes."

Clem couldn't understand Ida being here, nor her startling about face. It made him afraid of what he would find in the cave, but that was not an issue yet. He popped outside with the sheets, to find

Pandemonium broke loose when Santa Claus rolled down the main street of Dorado—but there was a sinister undertone of coming violence to the celebration!

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Drayne at the door, a warning on his lips. Boot steps came pounding along the walk and the night gave back the deep voice and raspy laugh of Gunboat Bowlin. Clem pressed the valuable papers on the lawyer.

"Under the hardware platform," he whispered. "See you there directly." As the man melted into the gloom, Clem spoke through the portal. "Men coming, Ida. It's your move." And then she was beside him, and Jackman's frantic bawl was waking echoes.

"It's Freeman. Stop him and I'll pay a thousand dollars. Two thousand to the gent who brings me Ida Redfern's head in a sack."

The boot steps halted. "Say, did you hear that?" Gunboat's awed tone. "Didja hear that, Spike? Two thousand fer Ida, his gal. He must be joshin'."

"Quick!" Clem had Ida by the hand, whirling her around the registrar's office. They dodged and they doubled back, pausing presently to listen over the pound of their hearts and the rasp of their breathing. Steadily the man hunt gained momentum and at times it seemed they couldn't escape. Once they crouched in the wash, with squads working each bank. A man brushed past them, so close they could have touched him, but darkness saved them. Later Clem boosted Ida to a flat roof, swung up to join her. And there they lay, listening to a council of war immediately beneath them.

A full half-hour elapsed before they could elude the searchers and make their way to the gloom under

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the loading platform of the Nevada Hardware Co. Ripton Drayne was not there.

"Caught in the dragnet," muttered Ida. Kiss your maps good-by, Clem. Why are they worth the risk you took to get them?"

"I hoped to use them to prove Jackman was juggling filings and murdering claimants. That would go a long way toward—"

"Then you won't need the papers," she broke in grimly. "I know the whole sordid story and if we get out of this with whole skins, I'll tell it to you. Tell it in court if I have to. So he doesn't care what happens to Ida Redfern, eh? I'll show him. Say— What's this?"

A lumbering freight outfit pulled to a stop beside the platform and the driver hollered: "Pull the pin, Jack, and stay with the trailer till I wheel the wagon to the Mercantile barn. Be back when I've fed the stock."

A moment later, when the wagon had pulled away from the platform, Clem and Ida were aboard, Clem snaking along the tarpaulined top toward the unsuspecting driver. The fellow never knew what hit him when Clem laid the barrel of his gun along his temple. And, before the end of the alley had been reached, Clem and Ida had tied him with rope from the boot, gagged him and rolled him under the tarp. Then, with the girl well out of sight, Clem tooled the eight-mule team down the gulch toward the desert. He lay back in the dust of another outgoing rig, passed groups of men who were hunting him but who never thought to suspect one of the horde of wagons which daily rolled in and out of Dorado. His gun lay beside him on the seat, ready for instant use.

AND so Clem reached the broad, peaceful floor of the star-lit desert and Ida came out of hiding to sit beside him. He expected her to demand to know where he was going, but she surprised him with an unwonted silence. Presently Clem said: "Maybe you're waiting for thanks. It will have to wait until we return to the cave. If anything has happened there—"

"Then you're going back?" Her eager fingers were on his arm.

"You act as though you're glad."

"Glad? Glad?" Her laughter rang out, changing instantly to tears. "I had no hope but that you were heading west, well out of Dorado. "I want to get back—soon. Wick needs somebody and . . . and he trusted me, cut those ropes. You're a cop, Freeman, and you wouldn't understand what that means to a woman like me, would you? Sick as he was, Truett treated me like a lady—"

She wept and Clem kept his eyes ahead, strange emotions welling up in him. After a while Ida's sobs quieted and she said: "I've been wicked, Freeman. And the worst thing I ever did was to take up with Toles Jackman and act as a come-along for his crooked games. And when I think of what I've done, or helped to do, to a fine man like Wick Truett, I could kill myself. I—"

"Why, Ida," Clem broke in. "You talk like you're in love with the boy."

"I am!" She snapped it, squaring to face him. "I've played the game, Freeman, knowing that when I fell for some good man, it would be head over heels. Well, it's happened and it makes me hate Frisco, the coast and everything I've known. It makes me want to get down on my knees and wear my fingers to the bone for Wick. But . . . but he's

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too good for me. Better if I . . . I never see him again."

"Don't know how good he is," said Clem. "But if you turn your knowledge against the Dorado stranglers, save the claims of fellows like Wick and punish the murderers of boys like Rick, you'll wipe out the things you're ashamed of and begin to live your dreams."

"You think so?" She stared at him, awe-stricken. "I hope so. And what I have to tell will take your breath away!"

CHAPTER VIII

CALL FOR FIGHTING MEN

FIVE miles out of Dorado, Clem overtook the Caxton family, the two men helping Amanda hobble along on already sore feet. Sight of Clem revived their flagging hopes and they were at such a pass they would have seized any straw. Amanda wept when Clem told of the cave and her tears started Ida. The two, as different as night and day, clung together for the sympathy a woman finds only in her own sex.

They left the still unconscious driver beside the road, drove on another half mile, smoothed the tracks for a hundred yards after turning off and drove toward the hills. Clem knew he couldn't drive to the cave, but the grades were flat and the sand firm. They stopped only when the mules could no longer pull the load, in a canyon at the foot of the ridge. Here the animals were turned out to shift for themselves and stock was taken of the load. The wagon was loaded with canned goods, rice, beans and potatoes. There was salt meat and blankets, denims and notions. And, not least, drums of water.

Everyone carried something up the half mile slope to the cave, where Wick Truett emerged to meet them. He was desperate until he saw who it was, then his relief showed in his face. After that he hardly noticed the rest for Ida.

"Girl," he said fervently, "I'm glad to see you. When I woke to find you gone with my six-shooter, I thought—"

"You thought I'd failed you." She took his hands, mothering him. "Not Ida. I'll stay as long as you'll let me. But you must get off your feet." She led him tenderly into the cave under Clem's unbelieving eyes. Obee grinned.

"Got it bad, ain't they, Clem? Some folks choose the dangdest times an' places to moon over one another."

"You two quit lallygaggin'!" his mother said tartly. "Land sakes, how can a body get breakfast when there ain't a smidgin of wood for a fire?"

A week of hard work saw the supplies neatly stacked in the cave, and then the wagon was chopped up for fuel. Ida and Wick spent much of their time sprawled in the sun, just below ridge top. It provoked Obee's amusement, but Clem understood. They were living in a fool's paradise and must certainly sometime soon be found out. Word would go to the Regulators and there would be visitors. That was what Ida was guarding against.

At night, to cover up his worry, old Ezra relived his past. The early cattle days in Texas. Brush popping. Vast rodeos, with dust assailing the sky. The winding trail to Kansas railheads. He told of Sam Bass, Wes Hardin, others, avoiding popular disrepute and clothing his heroes in shining armor. The rest listened but were not entertained. The specter beyond the ridge was too near.

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DAYS became weeks, with Wick joyful in his love, Ida more and more depressed with many fears. The time had come to call upon her, which Clem did.

"Folks," he said bluntly, "we are not here to enjoy each others' company. We've had interests in Dorado and hope to reclaim them. Ida Redfern will tell us what our chances are."

She sat up straight, her big eyes touching them all. She was changed. Her frizzy, bleached coiffure was gone, a little dark near the roots now and caught back with nunnish severity. Her dead-white skin, hinting of fetid air and late hours, now had a faint, becoming tingle of color.

"I should start this with a jingle," she said bitterly. " 'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the cave was a feeling of trouble and fear of the grave."

"Good lands!" Amanda Caxton clasped her hands. "Sure as you're born, it's Christmas Eve. I clean forgot. No bells, no gifts, but lots to be thankful for. If we just had a tree—"

"Toles Jackman has had trees brought in from Walker River," said Ida. "And a lot of gifts from Carson. His bodyguard, Gunboat Bowlin, will put on a Santa Claus suit tonight and make the rounds of the homes where the trees are dressed. It's Jackman's play at appearing a kindly, Christian man. But underneath that smooth front there's a heart as cold as ice and a brain as cruel as a wild cat's—"

With a tragic drooping at the corners of her mouth and never a look at the man she had come to love, she confessed her part in helping to attract suckers to Jackman's crooked games. She told of his swindles, of the money he had made and shared in part with her, and of how he had played his leverage in Dorado to make his first real killing.

"But I'll say this for him," Ida continued. "The Regulators weren't his idea. They were organized by Gard Burgess, to make his marshaling easier. But when Toles saw how it worked, he took the killer organization over, bag and baggage. They've taken many a life in the camp, mostly die-hards. But by far the bigger number of their victims were taken from their claims and traded their lives for their signature to a quitclaim. And those men are held prisoners in the Amalgamated Mine, kept behind iron gates and guarded by gunmen. They dig out ore for Toles and get food and drink in return. They'll be held there until Toles sells out and embarks for Europe. I . . . I was going with him. Just think of it!"

She burst into tears and Wick was the first to hurry to her side and comfort her. But when Clem came to his feet and strapped on his gun, Wick turned Ida over to Amanda Caxton and followed suit.

Clem nodded. "Yes, you, Wick. And you too, Obee. Don't worry, Mother Caxton, I'll not expose the boys needlessly. I've an idea that may make it unnecessary for them to enter the town."

"I hope the idea ain't in workin' order," said Ezra Caxton, and he, too, was belting on a big six-shooter. "I ain't honest-to-goodness smoked an iron since I quit the Chisholm Trail."

"And you ain't smokin' one now, little man," said his forceful wife. "Take off that pistol before it bends you sway-backed."

"But, ma—"

"Nonsense," said Amanda flatly. "You're stayin' right here with us wimmen folks."

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"He'd better go along with us, Mother Caxton." Clem's voice was low, but his eyes were on her and she assumed a dogged sheepishness. For a moment it appeared she would contest the point, then she wilted.

"All right, Mr. Freeman. You know best. Remember, though, they're all I've got."

THE four men, armed and silent, moved outside, the women clinging together and watching them with tragic eyes. Clem led the way over the ridge and down to the head of the lane leading to Gulch Street.

"Here," he said, halting them, "is where you boys sit down and kill some time. Keep your ears open. If you hear shooting, investigate it. If they close in on me, a little quick help will make a big difference."

Wick and Obee were displeased and said so. But Ezra silenced them. "We'll be here all ready to come a-runnin', Clem. If you get in trouble, whistle three times loud an' we'll come to yuh."

Clem shook hands with them and dropped into Dorado. With his hat pulled low, he moved along the boardwalk, noting the unusual attitude of the men along the thoroughfare. Instead of the wonted barging along in apparent aimless comings and goings, they were lined up as if to watch a parade, some well off the walk. Clem heard someone say:

"Mighty nice of Jackman to put on this Christmas show. Santy Claus comin' in with his toys, leadin' the sing at the bonfire an' then makin' the rounds with his sack on his back. Nothin' like that in Missouri when I was a boy."

At the upper end of the gulch a flame licked up and the shrill clamor of excited children—and there were many in Dorado—filled the chill night air. Looking up the street, where the gusty wind whirled the sparks this way and that, Clem felt the tug at his throat. And though there seemed no possible association, he thought of the boss of the Stampede Saloon, handsome Santee Cardigan. Maybe it was because Clem knew this was more than Christmas Eve. It was showdown night in Dorado. Every ally would count. Abruptly he turned and walked toward the Stampede.

The games were languishing in the Stampede Saloon and the bar was only thinly patronized. Clem tried to effect a nonchalance he didn't feel as he walked into the bright lights. He was strung up like fiddle string, missing no move. His first glance told him that Cardigan wasn't in evidence and that none of the patrons was likely to be interested in him. A second scrutiny brought up at a burly man who stood alone at the rear of the bar, sloshing whiskey in his glass. There was a familiarity about him and memory conjured up the picture of the two men converging on Ripton Drayne and leading him outside.

Even as Clem watched, the man tossed off his drink, wiped his mouth on the back of a hairy hand and walked swiftly to the door of Cardigan's office. For one clock tick he paused there, then he opened the door and entered. It had taken only seconds and in it had been no hint of trouble. Yet Clem felt the virus of a high excitement based upon what he thought Cardigan to be and what he knew the heavy-jawed slugger to be. As quickly as the other man had moved, Clem found Cardigan's door, popped through and closed it behind him. And trouble came to meet him.

A lamp burned brightly over piles of gold and currency and silver. Cardigan lay on the floor, one weak

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hand reaching up to rub his scalp which was split and bleeding. Over him stood the bruiser, even now swinging the gun barrel toward Clem. Clem leaped across the interval, his balled right fist swinging an arc before him.

Clem hit the man flush on the jaw and knocked him down. As he soared atop him, struggling to hold that powerful gun hand, he heard Cardigan say: "Freeman, for Pete's sake." And then: "Watch out, Clem. He's a killer. It's Prink Judd." And Clem remembered Prink Judd as a water-front murderer in San Francisco, a man who had been apprehended a number of times but had proved too slippery to be brought to trial.

CLEM strained against the power of Judd's gun arm and was no more than holding his own when Cardigan gained his feet, reeled over and drove his boot against the hand, knocking the gun far under the big desk. Barking a low curse, Judd launched a blow at Cardigan, knocking him against the door. Then he had wrapped his long arms about Clem and they were rolling, first one up, then the other. For a long moment they lay still, stopped by the wall, each on his side and Judd's muscles coiling and rippling. Then he broke his right arm free and chopped two hard blows at Clem's face. Those blows hurt and made it possible for Judd to rise. As he did so, Cardigan half kicked, half shoved him into Clem as he rose.

They lunged together, the impact making the lamp dance. Both landed with right hands and the crush of knuckles against flesh echoed loudly through the grunt of expelled breath. Then they were head to head, slugging.

Clem was beating the bigger, slower man to the punch now. Each savage swing took Judd in the face, but it served only to keep him at bay, never to rock him back. Then Clem missed and Judd grabbed him. For ten long seconds they strained, with nothing to be heard but the gagging rasp of their breath and the steady rapping as Cardigan tried to knock clarity into his shocked brain. Judd heaved then and Clem went down, feeling like a baby before the strength of the man.

Clem lit rolling, broke free and came up. Moving around, he laced long arm shots at Judd's lowered head. The big fellow stumbled in, his thick arms flailing. Clem brought his head up with a looping swing from underneath, half spun him and cracked him behind the ear. It was not a hard punch but Judd went down. He was trying to rise when Clem caught him and in one terrific heave lifted him high and crashed him down across the gambler's small counting table. The money flew to the four corners of the room; the table legs gave way with a sound like a shot and Judd spread-eagled against the floor. He tried again to rise but Cardigan had at last snapped out of it then and he hit Judd in the face, putting him out.

Clem turned and looked at the gambler, his breath dragging out in great sobs. Blood was trickling from one corner of his mouth and blood was draining across Cardigan's face from his ripped scalp. Both of them were a sight but Cardigan's eyes were full of admiration and his hand came out. They shook, still without a word. Clem bent over and began to pick up the money.

"Let it lie," Cardigan said hoarsely. "I'll pick it up in the morning. We'll have to hurry or we'll miss the Christmas fun."

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CHAPTER IX

SMOKY CAROLS

AS they moved along the walk, Clem had Cardigan silhouetted against lighted windows, and again he had that feeling of familiarity. He tried to analyze it but he was baffled. Past lines of waiting men they paced, men already stamping and swinging arms against the cold, until they reached the open lots where the balsam timbers flamed—timbers hauled from the Sierras. Here a throng milled, looking on while the brass band of the First Bucket Brigade tooted ineffectually against the roar of the wind.

"Poor night for music," Clem remarked. "Wind pulls the notes out before they're ready."

"People don't care," grinned Santee Cardigan. "They're here to see Santa Claus come rolling in. People never grow up, do they?"

Far down the street a roar lifted and marched toward them. And then they saw the rig—a buckboard decked out with ribbon and sprigs of pine, loaded with barrels and stuffed mailbags loaned by the post office and tooled by a very round and very jolly Santa Claus. The rig was drawn by a prancing team of black horses, gay with ribbons and fancy blankets and musical with dancing hames bells. The band swung over into a swift, catchy tune and the wind carried the excited voices of children:

"Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way,
Oh what fun it is to ride—"

The crowd broke to let the rig through and cheering drowned out all other noises. Santa Claus bounced to the ground as the wheels stopped rolling, and shook the hands of the dignitaries gathered there. Then someone leaped to the buckboard with an ax to knock the head from a barrel and start throwing small netting bags of Christmas candy. Clem was watching all this, entirely engrossed, when Cardigan's fingers were suddenly sinking into his arm and rasped words spat from the side of his mouth.

"Don't turn now," he said, "but I think Toles Jackman has just spotted you. He's gathered up three of his toughs and he's coming this way. Just duck your head and take off to your right. Lose yourself in this crowd and make yourself scarce. Jackman's got a price on your head and you'll be fresh meat for the Regulators if you're nabbed."

"You know," said Clem, "that Jackman's tied to the Regulators?"

"Why not? He bragged about it to me, dared me to do something about it. Jackman and his marshal, Gard Burgess, supposedly fired the night you were offered the badge."

"Did you know many of the missing claim holders are mucking in the Amalgamated, in chains?"

Cardigan's face darkened and he nodded grimly. "He told me that, too. He didn't know that I'm not Santee Cardigan, but Cardigan Santee Riggs, Martin's kid brother. I've taken time to study what I can do, but he seems to have me hamstrung. If I call in the law, he'll kill those boys down there. At least he says he will. That leaves me one out. I've got to kill Toles Jackman, as a Christmas present to Dorado."

"And leave yourself wide open to the Regulators, eh? Don't be a fool. We've got to be as smart as the Regulators about this. Where does Burgess live?"

"Stone house at the end of the street. Why?"

"I figure Santa Claus will pay his house a call. It's my plan to be inside that Santa suit when the mar-

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shal's door is thrown open."

The gambler's eyes widened. "Great!" he murmured. "Fine. I'll be somewhere around in case the going gets heavy. Then we'll look up Jackman. Now hurry; here they come!"

Clem ducked, twisting a sinuous course through the massed folk who paid him not the slightest heed as they clamored for candy bags to be thrown their way. At the outskirts of the crowd, seeing his chance, Clem darted into the mouth of a small gulch, from where a five-minute vigil failed to uncover any evidence of being followed. Up the small, steep gulch he went, across the face of the hill and down again, hitting Gulch Street where it was greatly restricted in width and largely uninhabited. Here, according to plan, was the fine residential district of the camp. Burgess and a couple more had already built homes here. It was said Jackman was contemplating the construction of a castlelike house on a knoll looking straight down the gulch.

Here, hidden by the jagged upthrusts of a shattered rock point, Clem Freeman crouched, awaiting his rendezvous with Santa Claus. He had some protection from the icy wind, but the cold struck into him, numbing him and making him curse the dragging minutes.

PRESENTLY the roar of the town lessened and a woman passed, leading three chattering children to the big stone house up the hill. Lights went on in the house and a stillness came to it as the family of the marshal waited also for the visit of the rotund man from beyond the North Pole. Soon afterward five men passed Clem, puffing as they climbed, and were admitted to the house. Three returned almost at once, talking of a dragnet to rake in a gent named Freeman and pull down a thousand-dollar reward.

As time passed and the wind increased and snow began to spit out of the inky black sky, Clem chafed his numbed hands and tried to throttle the fear that Santa Claus

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did not have the Burgess home on his schedule. And then he heard the echo of weary, plodding feet in the thin skift of snow, saw the bulky shadow materialize, halt and sigh wearily as he took a breather. It was plain the role of Santa Claus called for better physical condition than Gunboat Bowlin could boast.

Clem spoke one word: "Gunboat!" He heard the man's rhythmic breathing break into one long inhalation.

"Who's that?"

It was Bowlin's voice and that was all Clem wanted to know. Moving toward the bulky shadow, he said: "It's Tom," and gripped his gun with chilled fingers.

"Tom who?" Gunboat's voice held suspicion and Clem knew it would not do to let that doubt erupt. A yell or a shot would bring men on the run and his chance would be lost.

"Tom Loban," he said. "What's been keeping you? Gard's kids can't stay up all night."

Gunboat bit off a curse. "Hang it, you try luggin' a hundred pounds of toys over these hills. I'm done up. Doubt if I can even get the rest of the way—"

"Let me help," said Clem, and struck. The barrel of his pistol took Gunboat alongside the temple, staggering him. His great strength held him up and he tried to yell but only a hoarse squawk came out. Clem hit him again and he went down, jerked spasmodically and lay still.

Dragging the man and his bag to the rocks, Clem stripped off the Santa suit and the mask. He tied Gunboat and gagged him with strips torn from his shirt, then donned the red, fur-lined suit, adjusted the mask and shouldered the half-emptied sack of toys. His holstered gun was in that sack against the moment when he must get the drop on the heartless killer who bossed the stranglers.

A few moments later he was climbing the long staircase to the Burgess porch, attracted by the harsh, angry voices of men. At the head of the stairs he paused. Somewhere a woman sobbed: "Hush, you two. The children will hear."

And Toles Jackman's query, brittle and menacing. "That your decision, Gard? When a man throws in with me, it's permanent. You know that."

"Damn your threats, Jackman." Burgess' tone hinted at desperation. "I'm fed up with it. Your first proposition was straight and mighty interesting. But you've had me in the pincers ever since, crowdin' me here, crowdin' me there, edgin' me into your dirty work despite all my squirmin' to get out. Even when you fired me in a grandstand play to trap Freeman, you wouldn't let me be. I'm sorry I ever saw you. I wash my hands of the whole rotten business. Watchin' those kids down there tonight showed me just how far into the slime you've kicked me. I'm gettin' out and you can do as you're a mind to."

"You're not quitting me, Burgess." Iron had crept into Toles Jackman's voice.

Clem moved to the door and pounded for admittance. From within came the shrill, glad cries of children; the door was thrown open and they leaped at him, catching his clothing and pulling him inside.

"Santa, Santa! What you brought for us, Santa? Hang it on the tree, for mamma, for papa and for us." Two girls and a very small boy, filled with ecstacy. Together with what he had heard, Clem was made

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to feel like a robber caught in the act.

A door opened and a woman emerged, her face drawn and wet with tears she tried to hide. Behind her came Gard Burgess, his face flushed with unreasoning rage. And the last to emerge was Toles Jackman, his mouth a grim, angry line, his eyes glittering.

He flung a glance at Clem and snapped: "Come on down to the hotel when you get through." Then he jammed on his hat and strode to the door.

With his hand on the knob, Jackman turned, fixed Gard Burgess with a livid glance.

"One last chance, Gard."

The marshal shook his head, ever so slightly, and his wife burst into tears. The little boy asked querulously: "What's the matter, mommie? Didn't Santy Claus bring something for you?"

She went to the youngster, knelt and gathered him in, crying brokenly. Jackman snorted and went out, slamming the door. Clem, looking after him, said: "Oh I forgot. I have something for him." He reached in the sack, thrust the pistol into his sleeve and, with a package in his hand, went out into the storm-swept night. Jackman was about two rods away when Clem hit the foot of the stairs and called: "Toles!"

JACKMAN spun about, standing in the beam of light thrown from the Burgess window. Clem, too, stood in that glow and Jackman looked at him with a trace of bewilderment.

"What's wrong with you, you big dumb ox?" he demanded. "You got the Christmas spirit, too? Damned if I don't make some of you ungrateful hounds a Christmas present of my own. Well, get it off your chest, Gunboat."

The merciless fury of recollection swept Clem and there was no room in his mind for anything but the well arranged indictments against this man. His notorious San Francisco swindles; his unfailing brutality; his murder of Rick Truett; his dungeon in the earth, with chained men slaving under his whips; his crimes in the record office.

Clem's silence and something of his thoughts must have smashed across that interval. A queer mask overspread the broker's face and then froze away.

"My mistake," he said metallically. "You're not Gunboat; I can see that now." And after a pause: "Freeman!"

He shifted then and his thick legs and elbows spread. Clem let the gun down and the feeling of the butt in his palm was like the handclasp of an old friend. In a voice toneless and without inflection, he said: "Right. It couldn't have been any different than this, Jackman. It just had to be."

Jackman's answer was a shrill, powerful whistle, Then his smooth, swift hands brushed the skirts of his coat and his guns came up, flaming. He was shooting sharply uphill and he didn't allow for the fact and the bullets struck the earth at Clem's feet, one stinging his calf as it brushed past.

Clem wasn't spotting him much. He was aiming with terrible deliberateness at Jackman's throat. And when his sight was nested, he squeezed the trigger—once. He let the weapon fall to his side then and watched bullet shock pour through Jackman, who shot once more, wildly, and pitched to his side.

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Carefully, Clem moved to where Jackman lay. He stooped to shake the man's shoulder and found it lax and unresisting. From the porch, Burgess was calling: "What is it: what happened?"

"Get into the house, Burgess," Clem ordered. "Pack up your wife and kids for a quick move. It won't be healthy for a Burgess when the camp knows the whole story. And quick! The Regulators—" He said no more, for the door had slammed. The man who had been Jackman's tool was taking good advice.

The Regulators were coming, answering the last desperate signal of their leader, calling to his unheeding ears. From another direction came Wick and Obee and old Ezra Caxton, swinging into the gulch ahead of the stranglers.

"Clem!" It was Wick calling. "Sing out!"

"Here!" yelled Clem. "Might as well come up here now; you can't get out."

It was a fight, but not one to write into history. From behind the wall of the Burgess house Clem and his little force poured lead into the ranks of those who had identified themselves by answering Jackman's signal. And, while their temper was for fighting it out to a finish, at the discovery of their leader's body, they cooled down plenty when attacked in the rear and scattered.

Up the hill came Santee Cardigan with a posse raised in the Stampede Saloon. With him was Ripton Drayne and the deputy United States marshal he had brought from Carson City. To Clem the lawyer was like seeing a man returned from the grave.

Drawn by the shooting, Amanda Caxton and Ida Redfern came to the suddenly packed gulch, Ida to go quietly and with new dignity to Wick's waiting arms, Amanda to fuss over Ezra as if he were the only hero in Dorado.

"Listen!" Clem shouted suddenly.

Down the gulch lifted a vast roar, the town cheering the news that men had overpowered Amalgamated guards, unlocked the gates and released bearded, hollow-eyed scarecrows found sleeping in their chains.

"Come on," yelled Clem. "This Christmas Eve we've got plenty reason to celebrate. Santee Cardigan's offering the Stampede Saloon and lining up champagne. Ezra, you and Obee fetch in some Christmas trees. Amanda, you and Ida come with me, for the feminine touch. Rip Drayne, you organize the band."

Reaction had hit them and they hailed the idea like children. Fears and blasted hopes were forgotten. Grim reality, its echoes scarcely stilled, shrank away. People scattered, each intent upon making his own contribution to the celebration.

When Santee had ordered the Stampede cleared and arranged, Clem led him down to the Amalgamated emergency hospital, where a great crowd milled. They hailed Clem as he elbowed through. He was the man who had killed Jackman. Inside the hospital, Clem and Santee paused, fearful of what answer they would find beyond the inner door. Gulping, they shoved through. What a sight greeted their eyes! Forty men, wasted and worn, being scrubbed and shaved and tested for damage.

As Clem and Santee looked along the line, one of the derelicts stood up, whooping. Little more than a skeleton, Martin Riggs could still grin as he embraced the pair who leaped to greet him.

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"Bud!" His face sank to Santee's shoulder. "I . . . I never thought I'd live to see you again." Tears streaked his cheeks as he looked at Clem. "Freeman! I've been wonderin' what you were thinkin, not findin' me here. What did you think?"

"They could hang me for what I thought," grinned Clem. "Forget it, old-timer. Christmas Eve brings a new deal." He sang out: "When you boys are prettied, come to the celebration at the Stampede."

WHAT a celebration that was! Men still talk about it in the desert country. Tables were banked in rows, some being brought from the Fashion Café, with linen, flatware and dishes. The small stage was a bank of lighted Christmas trees. At one end of the bar sat the fire-brigade band, eager to play. Henri, chef at the Maison Dore, supervised the serving of hot food, and Ross Claiborn, owner of the Oriental Saloon, acted as dispatcher of the bartenders serving champagne. When a man had eaten, he gave his place to another. Windows and doors were jammed, and lines stretched along the wind-swept street.

At the big table, Clem sat with Santee, Martin Riggs, Ripton Drayne, Wick Truett and the Caxtons. With them was the Rev. T. Hemperly Hootkins, who had failed to interest Toles Jackman in a church project. The minister asked God's blessing and then recited the story of the wise men.

When champagne was served, Clem rose and called for a toast. "Merry Christmas," he cried, "to the boys who took the worst of it in the Amalgamated Mine!"

They cheered, and drank. Santee made them listen to him: "And to a flat-footed Frisco cop who didn't know when he was licked!" he roared.

Obee Caxton stood up. "Don't forget a lawyer who stood a lot of starving before he came home with the bacon."

Ripton Drayne laughed, his first in months. "From all of us," he said, "a merry Christmas to Santee Cardigan, who bore false witness patiently. Ladies and gentlemen, Dorado's Christmas present—no more claims by strangler law!"

The fire bell pealed cheerily in the rafters. Ida Redfern left Wick for the piano. Her fingers rippled and her contralto voice rang out with bell-like clarity:

"God rest you, merry gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
For Jesus Christ, our Savior,
Was born upon this day—"

Dorado thundered the carol. Those inside shook the walls. Those shivering outside poured their voices to the sky. Cooks sang as they toiled at their ranges. Waiters sang as they came and went with trays of food. Dawn broke through soft snowfall. And Christmas spirit had so pervaded Dorado that men even forgave ex-Marshal Gard Burgess, pulling him and his family off their wagon, plying them with food and cheer and insisting they remain to help build a desert metropolis.

Through it all, Clem watched and smiled. His heart was warm. Whatever else this night might bring, it could never dim his satisfaction at having played a small part in bringing Christmas joy to a freed Dorado.

THE END.

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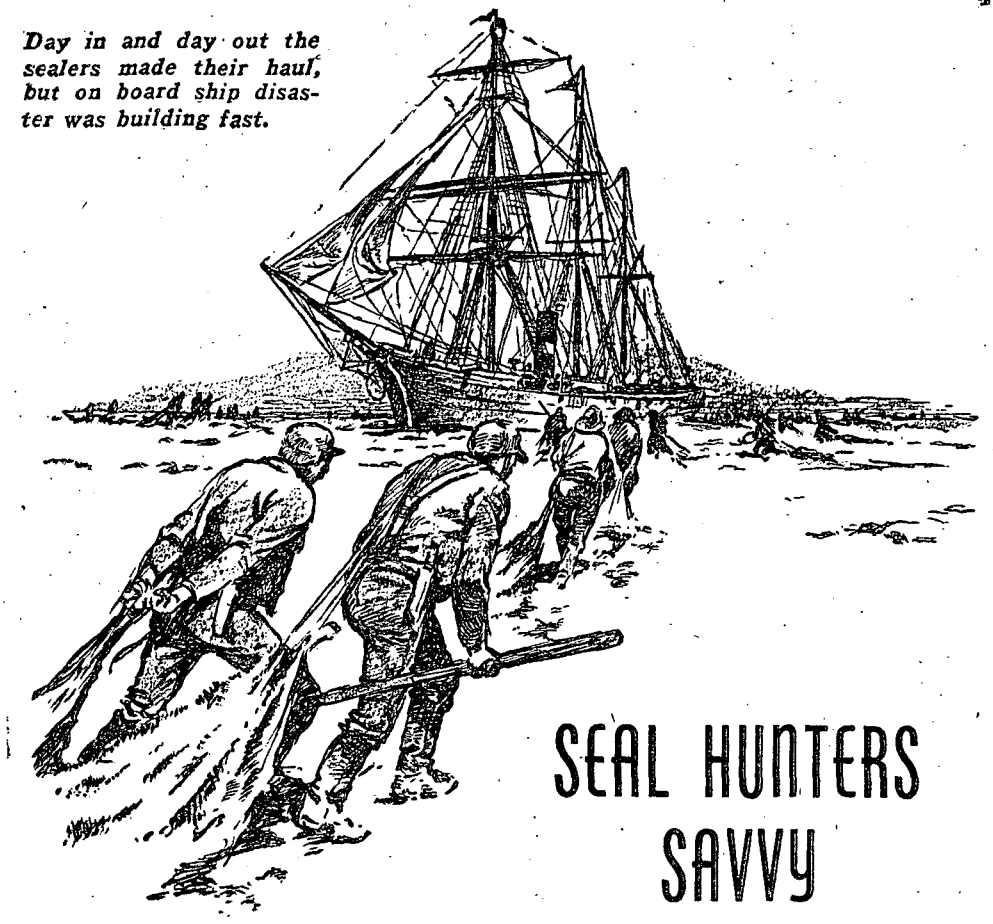

Day in and day out the sealers made their haul, but on board ship disaster was building fast.

SEAL HUNTERS SAVVY

BY WILLIAM A. TODD

With the worst riffraff of the Alaskan water front stored in its hold, the *Courageous* was a powder keg of trouble just waiting for a spark to blow it to bits

As dawn broke over the silver fields of ice, the thousand-ton *Courageous* sighted the wreck—and trouble.

First word came from the barrel up the mast, where Swede Benson, the tow-headed second hand, was calling the course through long narrow channels of blue water. Bridge and wheelhouse echoed the discovery. From stem to stern, the news leaped like a wind sprite, and down into the holds and 'tween decks, where a hundred-odd seal hunters in skin boots and Mackinaws were jammed in makeshift bunks.

"Wreck ahead!"

At breakfast in the deserted saloon, Captain Yank Hammond paused with a mug of steaming coffee at his lips. Somehow he knew it would be the *Lode Star*. His feud with Captain Mike Ludington hung over him like a storm

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cloud wherever he sailed. For three years, Yank had been hoping for a settlement, but not in the sealing season, nor with Ludington wrecked.

Two hundred of the worst riff-raff of the Alaskan water front were aboard Ludington's ship. They had left port a day ahead of schedule to get the jump on the white baby seals. And for the benefit of the *Courageous*, still lying at anchor, they had hung out more flags than wash on a Chinaman's clothesline. While Ludington tied down his whistle, his crew had bawled across the harbor a blasphemous version of the ditty that sends all good sealers northward:

> Oh, I'll go to the ice,
> And I'll make a bill,
> If all the crew will join me.
>
> I'll bring it home,
> And give it to the girl,
> The girl I left behind me.

Only those weren't the words of Ludington's crew, Yank was recalling, as his navigator thrust a thin spectacled face in the doorway.

"Looks like the *Lode Star*, captain," Doc Stevens said. "She must have got caught in a fast floe. It picked her up like a cantle of empty oil cans, and smashed her down on solid ice. Might be a low berg. It's the damnedest thing you ever saw. Better come up. The crew's swarming like rats all over her."

Yank traded his coffee mug for a fork, thrust it into the plate of corned beef hash.

"I finish my eats first," he said. His leathery face was expressionless. "Give the devil half a chance to drown them."

Doc Stevens removed his specs and stared at him. No man could let two hundred souls go to their death, no matter what the score against them. Yank might be young, reckless, but he was no fool. His *Courageous* was called a lucky ship along the coast. It never failed to make a bumper trip each year to the sealing grounds, and Captain Hammond had yet to lose a life on the ice.

"You mean that, captain?" Doc Stevens asked nervously.

"Wish I did," Yank replied harshly. "Be a good thing for all concerned." He set down his fork, hunched forward. "What are we supposed to do?" he demanded. "Take that scum back to port, and lose the short season of not more than four weeks, when every jack son of us needs his share in the hunt? Whose fault is it if Ludington doesn't know enough to keep out of a floe? Mark my words, Doc, you and all the rest of the molly-coddles aboard this ship will regret taking that flotsam aboard.

The navigator's pinched features cracked in a grin.

"Your snap is worse than your swallow, Yank," he said. "I'll tell Swede to come up on them."

"And stand clear of the berg," Yank shouted after him.

"It'll be a half-hour yet," Stevens' voice floated back.

Yank took his time with breakfast to think things out.

THREE summers ago, the *Courageous*, with a short crew of sailors, had been plying the islands and the northern coast, looking for freight and bartering with the Indians, when Yank found unmistakable evidence that the *Lode Star* was ahead of him. His trade had been cleaned out by whiskey bribes and quantities of rotten tinned stuff. Yank took a quick leg through dangerous water, caught the *Lode Star* in a narrow anchorage. It was just after sunset. The crew was ashore.

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Yank had unlimbered a dory and rowed in, alone, certain that he could handle the situation. But the odds were against him. The tribe was drunk and in no mood or condition to back his charges.

There had been a fight with Mike Ludington. A terrible battle in the moonlight, bare-fisted, over the rocks and into the water, and out again. Two big men with strength to kill, they tore at each other until they were battered hulks, unable to stand on buckling legs, neither able to down the other for keeps. Then, the *Lode Star* crew had jumped in, smashed Yank unconscious, and dragged the cursing, blubbering Ludington away to his ship, and off to sea.

With them went the story that Yank—not Ludington—had been caught selling liquor to the tribes. Along the Alaskan docks, the *Lode Star* men whispered that Captain Mike Ludington had thrashed the owner of the *Courageous* to within an inch of his life. It was a matter for the Admiralty Court, but how could they prove their case against a lot of lying, drunken Indians? Let Yank Hammond say something first to the law, and Ludington would tear him apart again.

Ludington always carried a blunt-nosed .44-caliber gun in the pocket of his pea-jacket. He surrounded himself with plug-uglies when in port, inviting Yank to make a move. But the captain of the *Courageous* could bide his time. Yank wanted to catch Ludington far out on a bowsprit, without any interference, to get him with the goods, once and for all.

In the saloon of the *Courageous*, Yank shoved back his chair and put on his pea-jacket. The wreck of Ludington's ship was not the way he would have wanted it, but he couldn't wait forever. He ducked his head at the low door to save his peaked cap as he went out on deck and up the companionway to the bridge.

The *Courageous* was within a half mile of the foundered ship, but it seemed close enough to throw a hook across the pond of blue water in the ice field. As Doc Stevens had said, Ludington's ship had got caught in a fast treacherous floe that had slid under and lifted her up, carrying her over a submerged island of solid ice.

The *Lode Star* lay on her beam, showing a barnacle-covered keel to the golden sunlight. Her mast was splintered, her gear strewn over the ice. It was a miracle that she had not caught fire, for she worked with steam, helped along like the *Courageous* with a few gray jibs. Now her riffraff crew was boring into every available hatch to salvage what they could before the berg split and swallowed the hull.

Yank found Swede Benson and Doc Stevens on the bridge.

"Stop the engines," the captain ordered. "We'll take them off in boats. Not one of those landlubbers comes aboard without supplies to last him through our season. We're not turning back. Ludington's crew will hand over their sheathin' knives and sharpening steels. They can do our dirty work, or they can swim."

Doc Stevens removed his specs to polish the lens. "You mean that, Yank?" he asked. "We're not turning back to port?"

"I tank he got one fine good idea," said Swede Benson. "We take them knives away quick."

Below the bridge, the deck of the *Courageous* was crowded with seal hunters, all eyes on the wreck. Most were hard-working coastal fisher-

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men, who took the sealing voyage each spring to earn new outfits for their traps and small boats. Some were sourdoughs counting on a stake of a hundred dollars or more to get them back to gold country. None yet seemed aware of their ill luck in having to rescue the stranded crew. They were remembering how Ludington had gone out of port a week before, flags flying, whistle tied down. Their humor got the better of them, and they made free with Ludington's fate.

"Hey, Mike!" a Bluenose bawled across the water. "What you doin' up thar in drydock? Countin' the barnacles to sell 'em for oysters?"

"Watch out for the polar bears, chechahcoes," shouted another. "They might sneak into your bunks an' bite you tonight."

ON the ice, Mike Ludington was breaking away from a dark huddle of figures near several smashed dories. Gaff in hand to save himself from slipping, he came to the water's edge. A week's growth of beard covered his big flabby face. His cap was gone, and his tangled thatch of black hair blew in the wind. His throat was that of a bull as he roared across the blue to the *Courageous*.

"Shut those fools up, Hammond! This ain't no laughing matter. There's a swell starting under us, and we might crack through any minute. Bring that ship of yours alongside. It's clear all the way down—" He halted in alarm as two boats dropped down the side of the *Courageous*. Then: "Hey! We can't wait! Don't you hear me, Hammond? We can't wait for boats!"

Yank lifted a megaphone to his lips.

"You'll wait until hell freezes over, Ludington, if you try to give me orders," he shouted back. "You better listen hard, because this is what you and that scum with you are going to do."

Yank pulled no punches. He could take no chances when his own crew was outnumbered almost two to one by wharf rats that would just as soon murder as eat. Four weeks at least remained of the voyage, and during that time, Yank said that the *Lode Star* crew must keep deep in the holds. They'd work for their grub in stowing skins. The first to show his skull through a hatch would get it caved in with a marlinespike.

Yank was the law aboard his own command, and the *Lode Star* crew were as good as prisoners. As for Ludington himself, he'd be under arrest the moment he set foot aboard, to answer charges back in port before the Admiralty for gross negligence at sea.

This last was the hardest. It was obviously the payoff in their feud. And it held Ludington motionless at the edge of the shining berg, his fists wrapped around the pole of his gaff, his bearded face thrust forward, shoulders hunched. Everyone understood what Yank's terms meant. They were a direct challenge to Ludington to invite him to come to the ice and fight it out. No man with spunk could accept those terms without doing something about it. Yank had Ludington dead to rights. They'd finish the fight of three years ago, for good.

But Ludington turned the challenge down.

"Send the boats!" he shouted.

On the bridge of the *Courageous*, Yank's jaw hardened. Beside him, little Doc Stevens stirred.

"It's a trick, captain," he said.

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"He'll try to fight you on this ship and that will cost you your ticket with the Admiralty. Ludington's a sharp one. Look at him, Yank. He's going back to talk with those scoundreds that he dragged out of the saloons and dives of Sitka and Nome and the devil only knows where else. Once they bust loose from below deck, they'll massacre us."

Swede Benson swore in his native tongue. Then: "I lick twenty all at one time. Nobody massacre Olaf Benson, you bet."

Yank scowled at his second. "Handcuff Ludington the moment he hits the deck," he ordered. "Take that pistol that he carries away from him. I'll not risk my ticket by fighting him on this ship. We'll go to the ice. There's four weeks for him to make up his mind."

"What if he don't, Yank?" Doc Stevens asked miserably. "We ought to turn back to port."

Yank walked into the wheelhouse.

All morning the dories of the *Courageous* crossed the fifty yards of water to the wreck of the *Lode Star*, bringing back grub and men. A snarling lot, they were, some reeking with whiskey drunk hastily from bottles they were sure would be confiscated. They came over the side in boots and oilskins, loaded with blankets and sea bags. Confronted by Yank's huskiest sailors, instead of sealers, they didn't protest against being searched, but when they were sent down the hatches, they blackened the air with curses and threats.

There were a few injured among them, and these were sent to the fo'c's'le, under guard. It was announced that two men had been killed and buried over the side of the berg.

The navigator and second of the *Lode Star* demanded a cabin, but Yank turned them down. From the bridge, he watched the last boat leave the berg and the wreck, which had been set fire to. A cloud of greasy smoke spread across the water like a pall behind Ludington, who stood in the bow of the dory with his instrument case tucked under his arm.

WHEN Ludington came up the ladder and over the gunwale, Swede Benson was waiting to meet him with handcuffs. A dozen sealers stood ready to help. Ludington halted, set down his instrument case, his big face purple with rage. His black eyes glanced at the bridge, where Yank stood.

"You'll pay for this, Hammond!" Ludington shouted. "Come down from your throne and put the bracelets on yourself. There's no law ever written in the sea books that—"

"I'll send the manual to you with the page marked, Ludington," Yank interrupted, "if you've never read that the captain of any ship is authorized to slap any person or persons in irons who menaces the safety of his crew at sea. You're a liar and a thief and a coward, Ludington. I've been waiting three years to tell you, and you know it. Now everybody can hear it, the scum that you collect for your piracy included. If you want to go back to that berg, Ludington, just say so, and I'll—"

Ludington tried to drown the challenge out. "This won't be the only charge I make in Admiralty," he roared. "You won't work my crew like slaves for nothing."

Yank waited patiently. Then: "You heard me plainly, Ludington, and you know what I mean about going to the ice. Take your time to make up your mind."

He turned to the speaking tube to

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order the engine room to release its steam.

Swede Benson snapped the handcuffs on Ludington, then searched him under angry protest. But no revolver was found on the captain of the *Lode Star*. When Swede demanded it, Ludington laughed in his face. It was almost a certainty that he hadn't thrown it away. The weapon was somewhere aboard the *Courageous*, smuggled in under a cap or in a boot, and there would be no finding it.

That missing gun was to cause Yank Hammond sleepless nights as they steamed northward into the ice fields, from one long blue channel to another, sometimes butting into wide sheets of cracked drift, always looking for seal. Deep in the holds, Ludington's riffraff sang themselves hoarse, shouted threats, and made themselves as much of a nuisance as possible. In three days, they pulled every trick in the book to get out of their prison, all of them at one time.

On the first day, with howls of terror, they announced that smallpox had broken out among them. Doc Stevens went down to investigate, unarmed, and they held him for six hours, until they realized that their food was being cut off.

On the second day, they said the ship was leaking so badly that two men had drowned. But Yank knew his own ship, and refused to heed them.

Ludington's voice was conspicuously absent from these complaints. In the dark belly of the *Courageous*, he was brooding and making his plans.

On the fourth day, the ship got caught in a jam of ice. For hours, Yank butted and reversed, until he realized it was hopeless. He ordered his own men from 'tween decks, where they were sleeping in shifts. All hatches were nailed down. Then the *Courageous'* crew went over the side and down the sticks to the ice jam. A fifty-yard hauser was played out to them. One hundred men grabbed the tow and, like a long team of mules, slipping, grunting, dragging, pulled the ship clear of the trap.

It was an opportunity that Ludington missed. With every available hand away from the *Courageous*, he might have tried to break out of the holds. But he bided his time, perhaps waiting for the moment when Yank's crew was out after seal.

On the fifth day, the sky blackened and the temperature dropped to ten below zero. A blizzard howled in, and the ship came to a halt, unable to see its own stem. Here was another chance for Ludington, for a man could smother in that storm when on deck. But the captain of the *Lode Star* waited, and the storm lifted in the night, with the sun showing at dawn.

Then from the barrel up the mast came Swede Benson's voice with the news that all were waiting to hear:

"Seals ahead!"

To the north were several dark objects on the ice—lone doghoods, that live with a small family off by themselves. But as the *Courageous* butted through the ice toward them, the harp seals could be seen farther on, thousand of them, with their pups, the most valuable pelts of all. There wasn't much time left to take them. The season regulated by the government was but a few days now, and the older seals were beginning to abandon their young, which would soon learn to "dip"—dive through the holes to find their own fish.

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THE deck of the *Courageous* was alive with activity as men appeared in skin boots, oilskins, with gaffs, sheath knives and sharpening steels, each with a small kit bag containing biscuit, dry oatmeal and a bottle of ginger and pepper mixture to warm them up. They went down the sticks with shouts, slipping across the ice. The hunt had begun!

There was no rest for Yank, or Swede, or Doc Stevens now. They patrolled the hatches with Winchesters in their hands, like prison guards, their tempers put on edge by the insults that were called up to them. All day the hundred-odd hunters of the *Courageous* worked across the ice, taking the young seal with a crack of a gaff on the nose, then skinning them and leaving the pelts in cantles marked with flags. With the sunset they came back, dragging a few skins with them and leaving the others for the ship to pick up during the night and next day.

When lanterns were lit and the hunters were wolfing the grub sent up to them from the galley, Ludington shouted from below that he wanted to "talk things over with Hammond."

"Ask him what about?" Yank instructed Doc Stevens.

Doc grinned and went below. He came back scowling.

"Ludington's crew refuse to stow our skins unless you sign them on the *Courageous* for a share," he announced. "You cut off their food, and they'll tear the skins up when we stow them. It's hell down there, Yank. I never saw such a pack of animals in my life. They're ready to do murder!"

Yank doubled a big fist and looked at it.

"What did Ludington say for himself?" he asked.

"Nothing about fighting it out with you, Yank," Doc Stevens replied nervously. "It's a trick, I'm telling you. He knows you can't keep this up. You'll get the jimjams and go to fight aboard the ship, and then you'll lose your ticket ashore. We're in the devil of a mess. You better wireless for the coast guard, Yank."

"Go back and tell that scum what the penalty is for destroying cargo," Yank said savagely. "I'll see they rot in the penitentiary. They won't eat if they touch a skin. And I won't call for the coast guard. It would take a week or more for a boat to find us, and the season will be gone. If Ludington's riffraff make any trouble, I'll lash them to the rail for good. What's holding him back? Is he afraid of me? I'm waiting to go to the ice with him—alone."

Doc Stevens rubbed his forehead with a palm. "He won't do it, Yank," the navigator said, "and you can't make him without losing your ticket. We should have gone back to port. We won't be able to stow enough seal to pay for the trip, let alone make any profit. It's a mess. I don't like it, nor do any of our own men."

Yank turned and walked away from him.

Doc Stevens went below again with the captain's dictum, but the crew of the *Lode Star* laughed at him. Let Hammond starve them, they said. It would be murder on his hands. Let him try to send skins for them to stow. They wouldn't work for nothing. They wanted a signed paper, giving them equal shares with the *Courageous* crew. As for Ludington, he couldn't be found. Somebody thought he had

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"climbed through a seam, and swum away to get himself a flipper dinner."

"Well, he might eat," Doc Stevens told Swede Benson, "but the others won't."

"I tank that scoundrel hide somewhere," said the second hand, who had little sense of humor. "He can not get off the ship."

All night, the *Courageous* hoisted skins to the deck, but none were sent below with ice. Hunger bit into the imprisoned crew quickly. All night their insults echoed from deep in the holds. Nobody could sleep, not even the hunters who had been out all day, for their bunks were 'tween decks, and it was rapidly becoming a no-man's land. The sealers caught what rest they could in the saloon and wheelhouse. Nerves grew raw. Something had to happen soon.

WITH the dawn, the crew went out again, some of them in fear of being left on the ice, with the *Courageous* captured by Ludington's men. Yank, Swede, and Doc Stevens patrolled the deck with weapons.

"When they get hungry enough," Yank declared, "they'll turn on Ludington like wolves. I know them. They'll make him fight it out. Without him to lead them, they're helpless. Before we're through with this voyage, they'll be begging to work."

"Mebbe," said Doc Stevens, but the navigator knew it couldn't last.

By night, the deck of the *Courageous* was becoming top-heavy with skins. They froze in solid blocks, allowing barely enough room for the hands to pass. The ship had been plowing the ice all day, picking up the pelts wherever the pans lay, but now a halt was ordered. The skins had to be left on the ice. And yet more and more seals were showing ahead. The hunting had never been better. But the *Courageous* was balked by the stubbornness of Ludington's crew.

Below deck, the prisoners had become quiet, as if saving their strength for an attack. The silence was more nerve racking than their shouts. Sleep for the seal hunters was a matter of finding an inch of space under some shelter. They huddled together to keep warm, grumbling, fearing for their lives.

In the morning, after the crew had left the ship to hunt, Doc Stevens approached Yank on the bridge.

"There's talk among our hands to give the *Lode Star* a small share," the navigator said. "We can take so many pelts this year that a few wouldn't—"

"I make the contracts aboard this ship, Mr. Stevens," Yank replied coldly. "Am I to understand that you are listening to mutiny?"

Stevens removed his specs and polished them.

"Why not listen to reason, Yank?" he pleaded. "Those rats down in the holds aren't human. They're used to starving in the back alleys. Hunger doesn't hurt them. They're feeding on the promises that Ludington is making them. They see themselves spending their shares in the barrooms of the water front. We're licked. Everybody aboard us knows it, but you."

Yank's gray eyes widened, his jaw squared.

"I didn't expect that from you," he said. "I'll sign no paper, when it means taking the rightful reward from my crew. I rescued Ludington's men from his criminal ignorance. They owe me their lives.

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I'm within the law. They're outside it."

"Not too far outside, Yank," Stevens retorted. "The code of the sea is a split hair. You can't call it mutiny, not until you've signed them on the crew. They're already under arrest, but they haven't done anything. It's only what they might do that keeps us from stowing skin."

"I hope we ban say, 'To hell with the law!' pretty quick," Swede Benson cut in. "I tank pretty good idea we turn live steam down there. That fix 'em, you bet."

YANK turned away from them. He went to the other side of the bridge. As Doc Stevens had predicted, he was getting the jimjams. So was his crew. They were ready to compromise. And what law did he have on his side? None that would convince a fat, baldheaded judge who had never been to sea. Ludington had licked him. No doubt of it. Yank had tried to outsmart the crook, and the captain of the *Lode Star* had beaten him in a battle of wits.

The story that would go ashore would be as pretty a tale as any split-tongued liar could fabricate. It would be one of persecution of the unlucky *Lode Star* hands, of starvation, of an attempt by a tyrannical captain to work them like galley slaves. And the tale would end with how Mike Ludington had forced Yank Hammond to his knees by sheer brain power.

The captain of the *Courageous* trembled with rage.

"Damned if I'll give in," he swore. "Damned if I'll let that mongrel put it over. I'll fight him on this ship first. I'll let him go to the Admiralty and say that I thrashed him just out of pure cussedness. I'll let them take my papers away and put me on the beach. But Ludington won't win. I'll scourge Ludington and his rats from the holds with Swede Benson's live steam before that."

Threats, accusations, self-incrimination—all idle words. Yank was licked. He knew it down deep inside, and he leaned helpless on the rail. His gray eyes fastened into the distances, where his crew were taking thousands of seals, only to leave the pelts in great pans on the ice, perhaps to float southward, and be lost with the thaw.

"Doc!"

The spectacled navigator came along the bridge. Yank Hammond could not bring himself to look at him.

"Want me to make out a paper, captain?" Doc Stevens asked timidly.

"Yes, blast you! I should have listened in the first place. Better to have put back to port and lose twenty thousand dollars in supplies and outfitting, than let that dirty—" Biting his lip, Yank straightened up, swung around from the rail. "Make it a fifty-fifty split," he said huskily. "Then there'll be no kick. I'll give my share to the *Courageous* crew for a bonus. It's all my fault. I admit it."

Doc drew a paper and a fountain pen from a pocket of his black suit.

"Here it is, Yank."

Captain Hammond stepped back in surprise. "You've already done it!" he exclaimed. "Confound it! Who gave you the authority—" He took the paper, scowled at it. "A rotten mess when my own navigator knows me better than I do myself," he grumbled, signing the contract. "Get away from me, Doc," he growled. "You've been trying to run my affairs for six years,

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ever since I was a third mate on a tramp. I'm sick of the sight of you."

Doc Stevens accepted the paper and turned down the companionway.

"Now, we'll see if Ludington accepts," he said.

"What's that?" Yank shouted. "*If* he accepts? Come back here. Do you mean that Ludington wants me to step down from my command?"

Doc was on the deck, hurrying. His own nerves were jangled. Blood pulsed like liquid fire through his veins. Yank Hammond could be difficult at times—pigheaded. But there were ways to handle him. All the captain's better traits, Doc attributed to his influence, exerted ever since Yank was a third mate on a tramp, fresh out of New England.

Sailors patrolled the deck with rifles. Hatches had been nailed down. Doc ordered the main hold opened. Kneeling, he gazed into the gloom below deck. Silence greeted him.

"Ludington!" the navigator called. "Captain Hammond is ready to compromise."

"Speak American, you lily-livered schoolmarm," the voice of the *Lode Star* captain echoed back. "What kind of talk is that? What does he want?"

Doc swallowed against a dry throat. "I have a share paper, signed by him," he said. "Keep your dogs away. I'm coming below. Strike a lantern, Ludington. This isn't a trick."

The navigator's words were a spark to a trail of powder barrels. A triumphant shout broke from the throats of the men in the main hold. Other holds caught the news, and thundered their victory through the ship, until it sounded like a mighty bombardment. A lantern spread a yellow, sickly glow in the gloom below. Doc tossed down a rope ladder and descended slowly, filled with anxiety. He wondered if he were the biggest fool of them all. He was certain that he understood the psychology of Ludington's followers, but what if he were wrong?

The stench of dirty bodies sickened him as his feet touched planking. It was a moment before his eyes could get accustomed to the light, and then they found Mike Ludington before him. The man's face was grimy with beard, his eyes red with hatred. He wore no handcuffs. The locks might have been picked. Ludington stood with his fists clenched, lips drawn back over tobacco-stained teeth. He was a wild animal.

Behind the captain of the *Lode Star* stood the second hand, Hook Miller, former bouncer of the Klondike Bar in Nome. Dick Thomas, ex-convict navigator for Ludington, was deep in the shadows. Other men were sliding through a door in the bulkhead like rats.

"Be quick about it," Ludington snarled. "What's the deal?"

DOC STEVENS, white in the face, offered the paper. "A fifty-fifty split," he said. "But you and the men remain in the holds to stow skin. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

Ludington chuckled, handed the paper to Dick Thomas, his navigator, without looking at it.

"No, it ain't enough, tenderfoot," Ludington said triumphantly. "We got that stinker on the run. He's going to crawl and eat slop for us. It'll be Hammond and his crew that come down here to stow skin. He'll sign over his command to me. You

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hear that? Hammond steps down from his high perch. We cut through the bulkhead to the engine room not a minute ago, Stevens, and this ship don't move until we get what we want."

Doc Stevens was suddenly calm. He did know the psychology of Ludington!

"I figured as much, Captain Ludington," the navigator of the *Courageous* said, and he was aware that Swede Benson and several sailors were listening above. "Yank Hammond has made you a fair offer, but it's not enough. You've cut through to the engine room. That's fine, Ludington."

"What do you mean?" Ludington snarled.

"Piracy on the high seas," Doc Stevens said coolly. "That's what I mean. You've put your head in a noose, Ludington. The law is a split hair, but you don't know it. From now on the gangplank is down, and Yank Hammond has full right to hang you from the mast—"

Ludington's arm flashed out. He caught Doc Stevens by the shirt front and shook him like a kitten.

"What are you talking about, you dirty little—"

A yell of alarm from Hook Miller halted Ludington. The *Lode Star* captain felt something jerk at the side pocket of his pea-jacket, but he was not fast enough to catch the quick hand of Doc Stevens.

Lantern light glinted on the barrel of the blunt-nosed .44 that Stevens had whipped away from Ludington. Seeing it, the captain let go of Stevens with a shout. Hook Miller leaped as the navigator fell backward. There was a club in Hook's upraised hand. As Doc hit the floor on his back, he triggered. The .44 spewed flame a yard long, straight into Miller's right arm muscle. He screamed with agony as he spun around and fell sprawling.

Suddenly the hold was in an uproar, with men diving to get out the bulkhead door. Ludington leaped back, knocking over Dick Smith. And Doc Stevens came up from the floor, smoking gun in hand.

"Piracy on the high seas!" the *Courageous* navigator shouted. "Get up that rope ladder, Ludington, before I shoot your guts out. I'll kill any rat that makes a move. I'm within the law, Ludington, and if you don't act quickly, you'll need a shroud."

The .44 crashed again, and a bullet smashed into the oak planking of the ship's side, not an inch from Ludington's ear.

On the deck above, Swede Benson was yelling like a man gone mad.

"Kill him, Stevens! Kill him while you got one fine chance! Kill him before I come down and split his head with an ax."

Ludington leaped to the rope ladder, skinned up it.

Yank Hammond was coming down the companionway from the bridge on the run. He didn't know all that had happened but he thought that Doc Stevens had been shot, and his face was chalk white with rage. When he saw Ludington, a roar tore from his lips. He came on the charge, through a long alley between frozen bales of seal skins.

Ludington saw him and jumped back, whirled, but Swede Benson, with a drawn sheath knife in hand, cut him off. With another howl, Ludington sprang up a bale of seal skins, vaulted across them, and to the gunwale of the ship. There was no time to get over for Yank Hammond was upon him.

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IT was a fair fight. Swede Benson held the sailors off, while Doc Stevens guarded the open hold like a terrier. Captain Yank Hammond and Captain Mike Ludington, two big men with strength to kill. They tore at each other while the deep bass whistle of the *Courageous* summoned the seal hunters in from the ice. Their swinging fists broke bones, as they floundered among the frozen piles of seal skins. They crashed into the mast, and Ludington tried to get a belaying pin loose.

Yank's knuckles took the upper row of Ludington's teeth, and Ludington went down, kicking like a bull. He came up, cursing, grunting in agony, and Yank smashed him down again. And again. Then Yank dragged Ludington to the gunwale, and Swede Benson had to keep him from hurling the big blubbering ox to the ice below.

"You lick him too much, Yank," protested Benson. "You kill him too quick. Let him go. Let him get all patched up. Then I get one fine chance to do the same thing."

Yank fell back, shaking with his fury.

"It'll cost me my ticket, but I'm glad of it," he said, wiping his blood-smeared face. "Where's Doc? Where's that fool navigator of mine? If they've hurt him, I'll break every bone in the body of every man below deck."

Doc Stevens had come out of the hold, gun in hand.

"You'll lose no ticket, Yank," he chuckled. "It was piracy. They broke through to the engine room. They turned down your offer. They tried to take over the ship. The law is a split hair and—"

"I say to hell with the law," Benson cut in. "If they cut off my live steam, I go after them with a ice ax. I chase 'em all out of them holds like rats. They go quick, too, you bet."

"No need for that, Swede," Doc Stevens said. "They're pleading for mercy down there. They're scared of this gun."

Yank turned to his crew standing on the piles of frozen skins.

"Get the whole bunch of them out on the ice," he ordered. "They'll load ice and seal and work like slaves." He glowered at Doc Stevens. "Did you call them pirates?" he demanded. "Is it in the books?"

"Plain as that broken nose on your face, Yank," said the navigator. "I looked it up when I made out the paper. It's about the only charge we got against them. You got full right to hang every jack son of them."

The crew of the *Lode Star* was coming up from the main hold. It was the bullet that Doc Stevens had put into Hook Miller that had changed their tune. Terrified, eager to obey, they went over the side and down the sticks. Slipping on the ice, they went out to the pans, a long line of them, dark figures in the sunlight.

Yank Hammond looked at his torn fists.

"Throw Ludington in the brig," he ordered, "and feed him." He glanced at Doc Stevens. "Come up to the bridge," he said, grinning through split lips. "We're going to wireless the story to the coast guard. Nothing like getting ours in first, and I want to be sure you tell the truth about what happened below."

Doc Stevens removed his specs from a pocket, adjusted them.

"I . . . er . . . wirelessed them three days ago, Yank," he said. "They ought to be here by tomorrow or the next day."

THE END.

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LOVE ME, LOVE MY LAMBS

BY S. OMAR BARKER

"I ALREADY got plenty cow thieves," growls this ol' doodle wack when I bump him for a job. "You know anything about broncs?"

"I know which end they wear the tail on," I says.

"Somebody must of told you," he grunts. "Question is, can you keep track which end is which when they're swappin' 'em?"

"Accordin' to what I've heard, Mr. Busby," I says, "all it takes to make

There was no telling where romance would lead an hombre like Romeo Jones, but his nose should have warned him to stay off the B Double A

"Runnin' onto Romeo with a gal ain't no surprise—it's what I find him doin'."

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a bronc peeler is a split up the middle an' no brains. How many broncs you want snapped?"

"Close to a hunderd, at five dollars a head when they're saddle broke fit to sell—which has got to be purty pronto." Then he looked me over again an' begun shakin' his head. "But I won't have no one-man hoss tamin' on my place. You might git a busted leg an' nobody around to shoot you. Nope, my good friend, if you was twins I'd hire you in a minute, but—"

"But me no buttons, Mr. Busby," I butts in. "The fact is, to all intents an' purposes I *am* twins!" I held up two fingers crowded flank to flank. "I got a pardner name Romeo Jones that's a bronc peeler from who first cussed the cuckleburs, an'—"

"Yeah?" he busts in to inquire. "Where you got him—in your pocket?"

So I explained to him that I'd left Romeo back in Las Piedras swampin' out for a red-haired waitress to keep our eatin' credit good at the Gizzard & Greens Café till we got snagged onto a pay roll somewheres, but that he'd promised to trail me, and would sure git there before night. What I didn't tell him was how I'd practically wore out my vocabulary tryin' to cuss Romeo Jones into ridin' out with me on the job hunt in the first place. But it'd be easier to drag a full-growed bull upstairs by the tail than pull my pardner away from a lookable female as long as she don't actually smack him down. What I figgered was that by the time the noon hash was baked he'd jest about outwoo himself with this redhead and get his ears knocked down to where he'd come huntin' me up for sympathy like he always does when his courtin' don't jell.

But the next mornin' found me still waitin' at the Lazy B Ranch and no Romeo Jones.

"Maybe you jest imagined you had a pardner," growls ol' Busby.

"Sometimes I wish I did," I sighs, reachin' for my saddle. "Hold this job open, will yuh. I'll ride back an' git the thus an' so of a what all."

"I'll keep it open," Busby growls. "Till somebody else comes along to fill it. You better hurry back."

HURRY back, my eye. At the Gizzard & Greens gobble joint back in Las Piedras I give this red-haired counter cutie a wink.

"Where's the fair-haired boy?" I inquires, meanin' Romeo Jones.

"Back in the kitchen," she answers. "Why?"

"I'll take ham an' eggs," I says, "an' while you're fetchen' it, send him out. I want to talk to him."

"Pig blush an' cackles!" she carols kitchenwards. "And come out here a minute, Sweetie Pie. There's a customer craves to view you."

Already she calls him "Sweetie Pie"! Nothin' like havin' a lady-killer pardner to git a feller in good at the hash house! She turns my way again.

"What color's your money, cowboy?" Just kiddin', no doubt.

"Listen, sister, don't you remember me? I'm ol' Romeo's pardner!"

"So what?"

"So it's all in the family. Surely you ain't callin' a man 'Sweetie Pie' in one breath an' denyin' nourishment to his starvin' pardner the next?"

Before she has time to answer, a ham-handed Swede big enough to hunt bears with a switch white-aprons through the batwings from the kitchen.

"What makes?" he inquires. "You

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speak frash with my Lena, hey?"

"*Your* Lena, my eye," I says. "I thought—"

"So did Romeo Jones," shrugs the redhead. "Till I introduced him to Yonny. By the way, have *you* met my husband?" She nods towards the outsize Svenska under a big white coosie cap. "Sweetie Pie, this gent says he's a pardner of that Mr. Jones you caught trying to kiss me yesterday—the one that spilled the dish water on your cherry pies when you threw the cleaver at him. He wants—"

"Never mind the details, folks," I busts in hastily. I'm already purty familiar with the kind of a jam Romeo's rashness for romance sometimes winds him up in. "All I want to know is, whichaway did he go?"

"By the vindow out!" Yonny pulls a fourteen-inch cleaver from under his apron and waves it towards an opening I hadn't noticed the glass was gone from.

With a sigh I reach for my hat. Half an hour of inquiry up an' down the street nets me the news that my pardner was last observed, about an hour before sundown, helpin' some ranch gal load up her buckboard. Then, at the Shoo-Fly Livery Stable, I pick up his trail. Stuck up on the usual letter rack just inside the door that the cowboys kind o' use for a post office I find a note he's left for me:

DEAR NOGAL:

Fine job, fine boss, fine prospecks. B Double A Ranch. Foller Oraca road thirty mile northeast an' come on out. It's gravy.

F. JONES.

IT'S about noon by the sun the next day when I come around a bend in the draw onto some ranch buildings, which I know cain't be the place, because I ketch a whiff of livestock in the air that ain't cattle. It's a smell I generally ride around, but with my tail plumb draggin' from heat, hunger, hope an' hard ridin', I head in here anyhow in hopes of a hand-out.

Bendin' my pony around the corner of the big shed, I run smack into two persons down on their knees, bendin' so low over somethin' that at first I can't quite make out what it is. With both of 'em sunnin' the seat of their pants thataway, it ain't hard to classify 'em. The tow-headed one, I know right off he's a cowboy because his shirt tail is out. Besides I recognize the patches. The other one I surmise to be a gal—an' never mind how.

Runnin' onto Romeo Jones in company with a member of the so-called fair sex ain't no surprise. It's what he's doin' that kind o' rocks me back on my haunches. Believe it or suck eggs, while this dark-haired damsel in the blue duckin' pants holds it for him, Romeo Jones, the curly-wolfest bronc rider in six States, is shamelessly engaged in tryin' to poke the rubber nozzle of a nursin' bottle between the reluctant lips of a lob-tailed little lamb!

"Openzy wopenzy oo's itty bitty moufy!" he croons.

If it wasn't for the risk of rawhidin' the wrong rear an' insultin' a lady, I'd've announced my arrival with the swing of a doubled rope end right where it would do the most good. As it is I kind o' control myself.

"Hellzy wellzy's firezy wirezy!" I says. "Since when you turned sheepherder, Romeo?"

"Oh, hello, Nogal!" he interrupts hisself to greet me, but both of 'em too busy to even look up. "It's about time you was gittin' here! Welcome to the B Double A, pardner."

"B Double A?" I snorts. "Since

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when's a sheep outfit runnin' a brand?"

"Since I thunk it up," answers Romeo. "I wondered if you'd be bright enough to ketch on. 'B Double A'—git it? It stands for—"

"Baa!" interbellars the lamb. "*Baa-a-a-aa!*"

"You said it, lambsy wambsy!" grins Romeo. "Light an' put up your pony, Nogal. I'll show you the work after dinner."

"In a bug's eye you will!" I drawls. "I got us a job bustin' broncs over at Ol' Man Busby's, Romeo. You gonna quit wet-nursin' *borregos* an' come with me—or have I lost me a pardner?"

"Now, Nogal," he tries to soothe me, "cain't you see we've done accepted employment here at the B Double A?" He looks up an' gives me kind of an agonized wink. "I done promised Miss Dee you'd stick with me, so you got to—"

"The day I turn sheepherder to stick with you or any other gent," I bust in, "you'll find the devil out buyin' skates!"

"Why, Mr. Nogal!" says this damsel in a voice that reminds me of the soft sweet sound of whiskey gurglin' out of a mellow wooden keg. "Don't you really like sheep?"

"No, *ma'am!*" I says. "Not none!"

Just then she stands up, turns my way an' I git a view of her face. Nothin' special in the way of a face, I reckon. It must've been them blue eyes, as dark an' liquid-lookin' as the water in a hoss trough on a bright Sunday mornin'.

"When Mr. Jones accepted the employment," she says, "he promised me his pardner would come to work here, too, and I do need the help. But, of course, if you feel that way about sheep—"

"Madam," I interrupts her in kind of a daze, "when my pardner makes a promise, it's my business to keep it!"

So the next thing I know I'm down there on my knees sunburnin' my pants patches just like ol' Romeo, tryin' to learn this lob-tailed lamb to take nourishment. We do manage to git the nozzle in its mouth, but it don't seem to draw good.

"Maybe it's kind o' stopped up," I says, for I'm still as ga'nt in the stummick as a gutted snowbird but too good-mannered to let on. "Lemme take a pull or two an' see if I can open it up!"

Miss Dee McPhail pokes the bottle at my face.

"Openzy wopenzy!" she smiles.

Good thing she held on to the bottle or that little ol' lamb would never of knowed what he missed.

AFTER dinner, which was chili-mutton stew served by a fat ol' *Mexicana* that Miss Dee called Tia Nita, an Tio Nacio, her sparse-whiskered, question-mark-shaped "hoozband," me an' Romeo tolled each other off to the shack they called the bunkhouse to wrastle a few private words with each other. Personally I'd kind o' got over my blue-eyed daze.

"Romeo," I opens, "I leave you in Las Piedras to kind o' maintain our eatin' credit while I adorn my carcass with saddle corns huntin' a job—an' what happens?"

"Why," he says, "the big Swede throwed a cleaver at me! Didn't they tell you?"

"Snappin' out them broncs of ol' Busby's at five bucks a head is real money, Romeo, an' no sheep stink throwed in."

"Ain't she got purty eyes?" he sighs.

"Never noticed," I lies firmly.

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"But as long as her pappy's a sheepman—"

"He ain't, though. He's dead. Don't you git it, Nogal? All them sheep belong to *her* herownself personal, hide hoof an' hair. Sheep is money makers, Nogal. All I got to do is marry her an' we're on Easy Street for life!"

"Who's *we?*" I inquires. "You an' the sheep?"

Romeo gits that hurt-dog look on his face that always makes the women want to sew a button on for him or somethin' equally motherly.

"*We* means *us*, Nogal—you an' me. You don't think I'd go back on a pardner, do yuh? Shucks, it's more for your sake than anything else that I'm doin' it, Nogal."

"Doin' what—herdin' sheep?"

"No, marryin' the gal," he explains. "Only you got to co-operate, dang it."

"What you want me to do—make you some spit curls an' tie ribbons on 'em?"

"No, jest co-operate. For instance, till you come, that bunch of sheep you see the dust of off yonder didn't even have no herder."

"They still ain't. I ain't never herded no sheep yet, an' I'm too old to commence."

"But, Nogal, you got to—an' pertend you like it, so's to help me make a good impression. Then, quick as I marry the gal, I'll make you the manager an' hand you a silk piller to set on."

"All right," I says finally. "I'll take a whirl at it. Who knows? Seein' me around so much, maybe I'm the one she'll fall in love with, then I can hand *you* the manager's silk piller, huh?"

"She won't be seein' you around none to speak of," grins Romeo. "You'll be out with the sheep."

For a week I manage to put up with it purty good, specially as Romeo rides out to my camp ever' day or two to report progress.

"She's kind o' kittenish, Nogal," he explains, "an' I dassent hurry her too much for fear she'll git the mistaken idee that I'm marryin' her for her money. I been helpin' her bottle-nurse a bunch of them orphan lambs, though, an' already, when speakin' to 'em she refers to me as their 'daddy wadzy Romeo.' Jest gimme another week an' you can take a day off to go fer the preacher!"

ANOTHER week settin' around on ant hills with nothin' to do but inhale the aroma of sheep an' wonder which way they'll wander

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next, an' I not only ketch myself talkin' to myself, but also discover to my surprise that most all I can think of to tell me is "Baa!"

Still Romeo reports he ain't quite made the grade.

"She's comin' around, though," he insists. "Two, three times now, when reachin' to pat one of them lambzy wambzies on the head I've patted her hand instead, an' she ain't even slapped me—not very hard anyways. An' yesterday evenin' she offered to sew some bullets into the tail of my shirt to keep it in. Jest gimme another week, an'—"

"*Baa-a-aa!*" I says.

Two days later a cowboy happens by an' between "báa's" I ask him if he knows whether them broncs over at Ol' Man Busby's is still to bust yet or not.

"Why?" he grins. "You want to sell him a sack of sheep stink to help smother 'em down?"

"Never mind quotin' me the bright sayin's of small children," I tells him. "I've rode broncs you wouldn't dare spit at through the fence. All I'm askin', is the job still open or ain't it?"

Latest he's heard it is, he says, but if I'm interested I better git my ridin' duds aired out an' git over there quick, for the rumor is that the job won't be open much longer.

That settles it with me. Romeo or no Romeo, weddin' or no weddin', silk piller or no silk piller, I'm done with sheepherdin'. That evenin', quick as it's cool, I'm jest fixin' to shake the dust of sheep range from off my feet for good an' all when Romeo arrives, plumb pantin' with purple-pink prospecks.

"It's a ketch, Nogal!" he effooverates! "Last night I plain up an' ask her if she'd considered participatin' in the so-called joys of matrimony, an' she says yes, she has—specially right lately, since the sheep work has been goin' so good. 'Course, when I snuck my arm around her she got kittenish like the women will an' kind o' give me the slip. But this mornin' I ketch a glimpse of a letter she give to Tio Nacio to take to the mailbox, an' who you reckon it was addressed to?"

"Billy the Kid?" I hazards.

"Nossir! To the Reverend John W. Hoozit, over at Albuquerque. You realize what *that* means, don't yuh?"

"Sure," I says, "it means the guy's a preacher. So what? I'm backin' out on this baa-baa business, Romeo, an' lightin' a shuck for them broncs of Ol' Man Busby's. You comin' with me—or have I lost me a pardner?"

Once more he gits that hurt-dog look.

"Nogal," he says, "ain't you even got the imagination of a *wahalote?* It means she's writin' to this preacher to make arrangements for our weddin'! Jest gimme another day or two, an—"

"Baa!" I says. But maybe he's right. After all, what's another day or two to a sheepherder? After all it might turn out kind o' agreeable for a feller to have his pardner marry a well-fixed woman—even if her money does come from sheep. Then if a horse happens to step in a badger hole an' leave the wealthy Mrs. Jones a widow, I mebbe could marry her my own self. So I decide to give him another day or two, anyhow.

Then the next day it happens. Ol' Tio Nacio comes out to help me bring the herd in for shearin'.

"*Mucha lana, mucho dinero,*" he

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grins. "Planty beeg wool, planty money. So queeck the *señorita* gonna sold eet, then *caramba!* She gonna make marriage—I theenk!"

WHEN we finally git them blatters all corraled at the ranch, Tio Nacio hands me an' Romeo each a wicked-lookin' pair of oversize scissors.

"Cleep cleep!" he says.

"Clop clop!" laughs Romeo. Gay as a gilded gadfly, he slips around to where Miss Dee McPhail is settin', purty an' petite, on the fence, an' commences playfully pertendin' he's plannin' to pilfer a lock of her purty dark hair. The girlish giggle with which she gits out of his reach does sound like maybe he's got her on the run, all right. You know how the women is, acting coy an' kittenish with their sweeties.

Meantime I hand my scissors right back to Tio Nacio.

"No, thanks," I says, pokin' in my pocket for my knife. "I'll jest skin 'em with the ol' frog sticker."

"No skeen! No skeen!" shouts Tio Nacio. "Cleep cleep!"

He grabs an ol' ewe an' starts shearin' the wool right off of her to show me how it's done. It was the first time I ever knowed there was any way to git the wool off a sheep without skinnin' 'em.

"No skeen!" he grins again. "Cleep cleep!"

Nevertheless, when I take them broad-lipped scissors an' start cleep cleepin', seems like I wack as much hide as wool, an' the ol' ewe don't like it. The results is she wiggles loose from me an' when I take after her, about fourteen lambzy wambzies git tangled in my feet an' my nose roots gravel. Only bein' in a sheep pen, it ain't gravel.

Over acrost the corral I spy Romeo Jones leanin' against the fence, kind o' touchin' his thumb to his pair of scissors like a woodsman does to an ax to see if it's sharp enough. So far he ain't even offered to try usin' 'em. Of course, he's got his courtin' to 'tend to. In fact it looks like all he's done ever since we hit this wool farm is loaf an' make love—if any—while I been out sheepherdin'.

So when he calls out to me now not to git excited, somehow the advice don't set good. By the time I ketch that ol' ewe again I'm madder'n a teased rattlesnake with cactus in his tongue. When that ol' she sheep starts strugglin' again, I take me a good deep breath an' let 'er rip.

"You bug-eared, misborn, blattin' ol' so an' so!" I bawls.

Next thing I know there's a small firm hand on my shoulder an' a small firm voice at my ear.

"Swearing won't help," says Miss Dee McPhail severely. "What's more, I simply won't permit it!"

At that I give my ewe one last snip, turn her aloose an' throw them sheep shears plumb out o' the corral.

"Listen, lady blue eyes!" I snorts. "If I can git used to sheep, you can git used to cussin'! Fact is, if you're goin' to marry a cowboy, you'll have to!"

"But I'm not going to marry a cowboy, Mr. Nogal!" she widens them purty blue eyes. "I'm going to marry a preacher!"

"Oh oh!" I says. "Romeo, did you hear what the lady said?"

"You . . . you mean"—Romeo stares at her in a daze—"you . . . you wasn't writin' that Rev. John W. Hoozit to git him to come out an' marry us?"

"Why, of course not!" She seems

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sure 'nough surprised. "He's my fiancé."

"Fiancé?" gulps Romeo. "What's that?"

"In this case it sure ain't a cowboy!" I dryly drawls. "Excuse us, ma'am. No wonder you didn't care for cowboy cussin'! Come on, Romeo—let's drift!"

Just then ol' Tio Nacio, more worried about sheep shearin' than fiancés, prods Romeo in the ribs with the blunt end of the sheep shears he has dropped.

"Cleep cleep!" he urges.

"Clop clop!" grunts Romeo, an' I purt near have to run to keep up with him goin' after our ridin' gear an' ponies.

NOGAL," mourns Romeo solemnly as we ride townwards to give our woes a temporary drowndin' on sheepherder's wages, "there's two things I'm plumb done with, now an' forever: sheep an' women, so help me Jehossyphat! You reckon that Busby bronc-ridin' job is still open?"

Next day we ride out to see. We ketch Ol' Man Busby jest fixin' to take out in a loaded buckboard.

"Sorry, boys," he says, "I got tired of waitin' an' traded off them broncs unbroke. Fact is, I've done sold out. But if you want a job"—there's a strange twinkle in his eyes—"I'll interduce you to the new owner."

Which he does—a sour-lookin' ol' apple name Tyler, flanked by a brown-eyed, baby-faced daughter as purty as a spotted dog under a little red wagon.

"Yeah, I need hands all right," grunts this new owner. "I'll hire you both, forty a month an' found. Only I'm stockin' the place with sheep. You boys got any objections to—"

I don't wait to hear no more, but I ain't more'n half turned around to leave when Romeo yanks me back.

"It's the chance of a lifetime, Nogal!" he whispers. "I'll marry the daughter an'—"

He turns to give Mr. Tyler his answer, but his eyes are on the gal.

"Objections to woollies?" he says. "Why, Mr. Tyler, sheep is our fav'rite animal—ain't they, Nogal?"

"That's right," I says feebly. "Little sheepzy weepzies!"

THE END.

Under the onslaught of Piutes, renegades and hell raisers in general, the Fireball Express Line was buckling when Mike Valley, tooling a double load of trouble, threw in his last blue chip with the

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With a fling of its thick neck the bull sent the dog sprawling, and then, roaring in triumph, lunged forward to finish the boy.

Would killing or kindness remove that

BARRIER OF HATE

BY KENNETH GILBERT

WHAT Jim Dyke saw as he came over the hogback knoll was stark drama. There was his field-trial setter, Skagit Chief, frozen into statuesque pose before a willow run where a wily old Chinese pheasant crouched in hiding. Just beyond the willows was old Jeff Blodgett, red-faced with anger and triumph. Beside Blodgett was the latter's ten-year-old grandson, Skipper, solemn-eyed with suppressed excitement. At that moment, hearing Dyke's footsteps, perhaps, and aware that it was cornered, the big pheasant burst out of the covert with a thunderous roar of wings, taking a course almost directly over the heads of Blodgett and the boy.

Blodgett whipped up the double-barreled shotgun which lay across his left arm. There was the sharp thud

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of smokeless powder, and the pheasant—a glorious thing of green and gold and magenta—plummeted to the ground.

Skagit Chief, who had obediently dropped as the bird flushed, turned his head inquiringly toward Jim Dyke, for the latter had not given the usual command to "fetch." Instead, Dyke stood there staring incredibly at Blodgett; staring, too, at the new fence which cut the heart of the willow run.

That fence had not been there when Jim Dyke had been rushed to the city hospital three weeks before, to wage stubborn battle against an old malady. He was still a sick man, still weak and unsteady on his feet, and the sudden significance of the fence left him a little dazed. It was time to think, to move carefully. Jeff Blodgett was not the kind who did things rashly, or made a mistake.

"You get the idea, Dyke," Blodgett said meaningly. "Don't send your dog beyond that fence! This is *my* land now!"

Dyke rubbed his chin. Skagit Chief, growing impatient, whined.

"There's never been a fence there," Dyke remarked at last. "Government land. You know, Blodgett, I've always trained my bird dogs in this valley. You know I'm readying Chief for the field trials next month." He could have added that if Chief won that trial it meant a two-thousand-dollar purse. Jim Dyke needed that money if he hoped to hang onto his tiny fruit ranch in the Cascade foothills. Probably Blodgett knew it already.

"This valley is the course that will be run at the trials," Dyke went on. "A fence here cuts the thing in two. Birds fly over it and stay there. No chance for me to train my dog, and there won't be a handful of birds left on this side for the other dogs to handle during the trials."

"You get the idea, Dyke," Blodgett repeated. "I've filed on a whole section of land in this valley. Need it for stock I'm going to run here. Don't aim to have your dogs bothering my stock!" He patted the gun significantly. "I aim," he declared warningly, "to protect this ground I've homesteaded. How it affects *you*, Dyke, doesn't worry me none! You should have thought twice when you refused to pay for the calf that your dog, there,"—and he indicated the beautiful gentle-eyed Llewellyn—"run to death!"

"Grandpa," broke in the boy excitedly, "I've told you a hundred times that Chief didn't kill that calf! A coyote did it! I saw—"

"Shut up!" commanded his grandfather harshly. "Don't you tell me I'm wrong, or I'll give you a lacing!"

The boy subsided instantly at the threat; but Skagit Chief, hearing his name mentioned, wagged a tail that was "feathered" with long, silky hair. He knew Skipper, and loved him. Sometimes when Jim Dyke was busy around the ranch, the dog would slip away and meet Skipper in the valley, and together they would have glorious times working out the intricate problem offered by a crafty old Chinese pheasant rooster who actually seemed to enjoy matching his wits against the keen-nosed instinct of the bird dog. The two of them never harmed any of the gorgeous birds with which the valley abounded; it was merely a game which they played. And now things had gone wrong. Skagit Chief knew, or rather sensed it, even as did the boy. Feud had raised its ugly head, because old Jeff Blodgett was a stubborn man, and Jim Dyke was loyal to his own dog.

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THOUGHTS raced through Jim Dyke's mind. He knew what would happen if he sent Chief after the pheasant lying in the field beyond the fence. Blodgett would undoubtedly kill the dog. Yet, Chief was expecting to be sent after the game. It was part of his training. If Dyke took him away now, after the game had been killed, there would be doubt implanted in the sensitive mind of the dog. He would lose faith in Dyke; he would be puzzled. Next time—and perhaps during the actual field trial, when every mistake he made would be a black mark against him—Skagit Chief would be uncertain what to do.

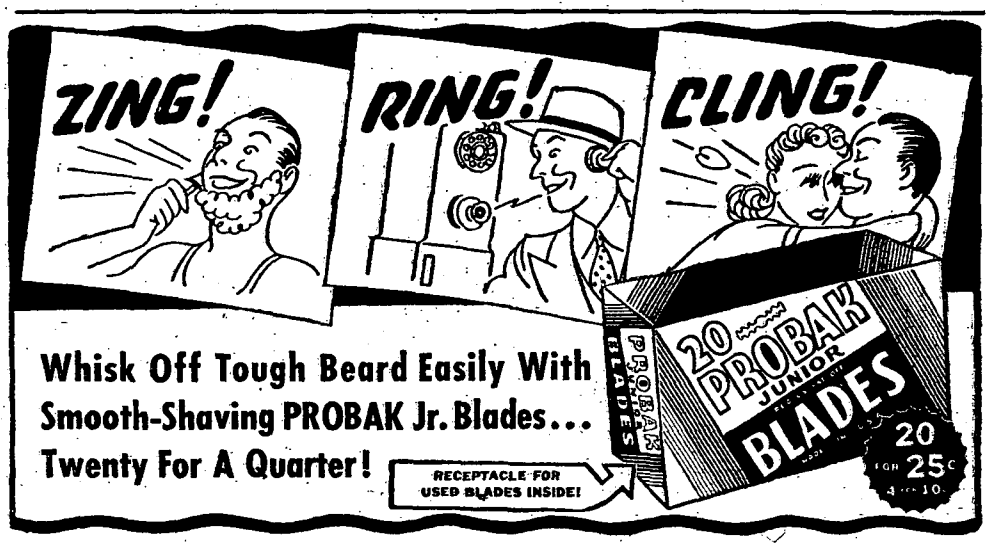
Jim Dyke bit his lip, anger rising in him. He knew, even as Skipper had said, that Skagit Chief had not run Blodgett's calf to death. A coyote, perhaps, or some outlawed, sheep-killing dog which had wandered through the country, seeking to gratify its blood lust, had destroyed the calf. If Jim Dyke had paid for the animal, it would have been admission that Chief was responsible for its death. Dyke could likewise be stubborn, where his dog was concerned.

Skipper had walked to where the bird had fallen, picked it up and returned to his grandfather's side. There was a growing impulse in Jim Dyke to have a showdown with Blodgett, to call his bluff.

"Chief!" he said sharply. The dog looked up expectantly, knowing what was coming. His master was going to send him through the fence, despite that angry man yonder! But even as the command "fetch!" was on Dyke's lips, Skipper, as though sensing the impending tragedy, moved quickly. He swung the bird over the fence, and it fell on Dyke's side.

"You little meddler!" roared the infuriated Blodgett. "What'd you do that for? That bird was mine!"

Jim Dyke laughed. Chief, at a gesture from him, had leaped forward and retrieved the bird, sitting there on haunches, proudly holding the prize between jaws that gripped firmly yet lightly. As Dyke took it from him, the man called to the boy: "Thanks, Skipper! And that goes for Chief, too!" He added meaningly to Blodgett: "Maybe you'd like to come over on *my* side of the fence and get this bird! Well,



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come ahead—even if you have got a gun!"

But the red-faced man did not reply. He stood there while Dyke, carrying the bird, turned away toward home, followed by the contented dog. Then Blodgett, muttering threats of vengeance, likewise swung about and stalked off, his grandson trailing him.

IT was a small triumph for Jim Dyke, and an empty one. Possession of the bird was unimportant, even though it had fulfilled the expectation of Skagit Chief. For, Jim Dyke told himself gloomily, Blodgett's revenge would be more far-reaching. Dyke moved along in silence, and the bright sunshine, which softened the crisp edge of fall in the air, no longer was like wine after his siege in the hospital. From the rolling hills which stretched on Blodgett's side of the spite fence came the intermittent bawling of cattle, answered at times by a throaty bellow. Dyke knew it was Blodgett's prize bull. Heretofore the stock had been confined to Blodgett's upper pastures; the feed in the valley was none too plentiful, even though the willows and weed patches were fine cover for birds.

"That's all it is, and all it ever will be," Dyke told himself. "Hunting ground. Blodgett doesn't need it for a homestead." But no matter what justice lay in the situation, Jim Dyke knew that it was of vast importance to him.

In the field trials Skagit Chief would be up against some of the finest bird dogs in the Pacific Northwest. Year after year they had run this course, because it was birdy ground and open enough so that the field-trial judges could observe almost every action of the dogs being tested. Ever since Jim Dyke had brought his wife to this plateau country ten years before, and had observed the field trials, he had waited for the day when he would have the winning dog. He had trained other dogs in the past, but they had never shown the class necessary to compete with the speedy, high-class setters and pointers which ranged the course. Jim Dyke loved dogs, but until he acquired Skagit Chief as a very young pup and began to train him, he had never dared hope to own a sweepstakes winner. If it hadn't been for the feud with Blodgett—always a surly man who disliked dogs anyway—Skagit Chief's education would have been complete by the time the field trials rolled around.

Purposely, Jim Dyke had held Chief out of the previous year's futurity, the trial for young dogs up to two years old. It was going to be all or nothing. Skagit Chief, knowing the course as he knew his own kennel, trained and polished to the last degree, should have carried off the honors. Now, with the trials a few weeks away, and the birdiest half of the valley closed off by Jeff Blodgett's fence, there wasn't going to be much opportunity to make Chief a finished dog.

"But I've *got* to win," Dyke kept telling himself. He was deeply in debt when sickness had come; he had lost much time from his work, and he wouldn't be able to catch up to any extent until he got his strength back. That two-thousand-dollar first prize meant all the difference between disaster and security. If he failed, it meant that he'd lose his little ranch, and he and his wife would have to move on. Probably Blodgett would take grim satisfaction in adding Dyke's acres to his own.

Mary Dyke nodded understanding

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when her husband told her what had happened down by the spite fence. "Maybe," she pointed out, "if you admitted that you were wrong, and paid Mr. Blodgett for the calf, he'd let you use the valley after all!"

"But I'm *not* wrong!" insisted Jim stubbornly. "Anyway, where'd I get a hundred dollars to pay for that blooded calf which he claims Chief ran to death? Chief isn't guilty! He'd never harm stock!"

"I'm not so sure," his wife replied. "He doesn't like cattle. If another dog killed that calf, or a coyote did it, it's strange that nobody saw signs. Skipper said—"

Jim Dyke flung himself out of the house, unwilling to hear more. It was incredible to think that Skagit Chief had ever attacked cattle. So far as he knew the dog was indifferent toward them, being concerned solely in hunting game birds. Yet, Dyke knew, his wife had an intuitive sense in some matters which was almost uncanny. She might be right; Jeff Blodgett might even be right. But when Jim Dyke felt something touch his knee and looked down into the inquiring face of Skagit Chief, he knew that both were wrong.

He patted the dog's smooth head, and the limpid eyes regarded him adoringly. "We'll make out, Chief," he told the dog. "This is your big chance, and you're going to have it even if I have to train you in the back yard! We'll show Blodgett that we can win, feud or no feud!"

BUT it was hard work, for Dyke had no strength to spare. With the valley closed—if he had dreamed that Blodgett would outwit him by filing on the land as a homestead, Dyke could have protected himself by beating the other to the move—he was forced to spend long hours ranging dry uplands where birds were rarely found. Bird-finding possibilities in the unfenced portion of the valley quickly became exhausted; the game merely winged over to Blodgett's land and stayed there.

Day after day Skagit Chief ranged the uplands in vain search for pheasants. Sometimes he would look at Jim Dyke questioningly, as if asking what was wrong, and why they didn't hunt in the valley where even the most inexperienced pup knew there were plenty of birds. Jim Dyke couldn't explain that, of course; he merely kept on with his drudgery, and the day for the field trials neared.

"At least," he consoled himself, "the other dogs are going to have a hard time finding birds here." But that merely meant the field trials would be transferred to more productive areas, where the seasoned dogs would quickly demonstrate their skill and training. Meanwhile, Chief's education came to a stop.

Struggling against a sense of futility, Jim Dyke stuck to the training. His wife never mentioned the feud again, nor repeated her suggestion of how it could be settled. Once, when Jim Dyke came back to the house from training Chief, he saw Skipper Blodgett leaving hurriedly by the front gate. But that was not unusual; both Dyke and his wife were fond of the boy, and on this point they were agreed with Jeff Blodgett, for the latter worshiped his grandson, even though his manner toward him seemed harsh and stern sometimes. It was the next day after Dyke had seen the boy that Skagit Chief disappeared. Dyke was frantic.

"Blodgett's behind this," he declared. "Maybe Chief got over on his land, and he shot the dog. He'd do it, too!"

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But Mary Dyke seemed strangely undisturbed as she went about her work. "Maybe he's just gone hunting by himself," she told her husband.

Dyke was minded to take his old shotgun and go over to Blodgett's place and charge the latter with stealing the dog. His wife argued him out of it. "Chief will be back!" she insisted.

She was right, too, for just before dark Chief came into the yard, tongue hanging out, his black-and-white coat matted with cockleburs, tired-looking but apparently happy and content. He looked up at his master wisely, as though saying: "Guess what I've been doing!" But Jim Dyke, worried still over what his wife had said about Chief's dislike of cattle—something which the man could not explain to himself—shook his head. Chief had been up to something, but what it was there was no way of knowing. He *might* have been chasing Jeff Blodgett's cattle, and if that was true, then he was lucky to have escaped with his life, for Blodgett was bitter and he hated dogs.

Yet next day when Dyke took the dog on the usual hunt through the fenced-off portion of the valley, he made an astounding discovery. Never had he seen so many pheasants there! The place seemed fairly alive with them. Chief hunted like a veteran, and made stand after stand in beautiful fashion. Dyke came home with the pockets of his hunting coat bulging with game, and a more hopeful look on his face. When he told his wife about the miracle, she merely smiled.

The mystery endured right up to the day of the field trials. Birds would get scarce on Dyke's side of the fence; then Chief would vanish. When he returned, and he and Dyke started out again, there would be plenty of game on which he could be trained. But when Jim Dyke awoke on that crisp fall morning and realized that this was the day of days for him, when all his chips were in the pot, everything hazarded on a single throw of the dice, he felt shaky about the outcome.

It didn't seem possible that Skagit Chief would stand a chance with the highly trained veterans against whom he would be pitted. As he finished his breakfast, Dyke could hear the excited barking of dogs, and knew that the first competitors were going by his place for the start a half mile away. When he reached the spot, the preliminaries were already under way. The futurity was being run off.

AFTER this was settled, and a two-year-old pointer was adjudged winner of the puppy stakes, pairings for the more important test began. Dogs were selected by numbers drawn from a hat, and two of them put down for thirty-minute runs. When each run was finished, the winner was eligible to compete again. It was grueling work, a test of stamina for such dogs as survived. When the trial was narrowed down to the last pair, Skagit Chief, by some miracle it seemed to Jim Dyke, was still in the running.

Just how it had happened, Dyke could not be sure. A lot of luck, he would have admitted; and yet conditions were strange. There seemed a remarkable abundance of birds on the course, and this was odd because Chief had been hunting the valley regularly. Where had the birds come from? Dyke could only believe that they had come from Blodgett's land, which must mean that the cattle which Blodgett had turned into the newly fenced area must have kept

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the birds moving, and driven them back on Dyke's side.

True, Chief had made another of his mysterious disappearances two night before, but Dyke saw no significance in that. He had likewise seen Skipper strolling along the road shortly before Chief vanished, but there was nothing unusual in that, either. Anyway, Chief seemed to be making up now for his previous lack of training when birds had been scarce.

There was only one heat left, and that was against Bluestocking, a hard-tailed old pointer who had been champion two years in succession, and to whom field trials were merely a joyous chore.

Tough and wiry, Bluestocking knew the ways of game birds, and he likewise knew tricks of the field-trial game. In his eagerness to win, he seemed to understand that instead of honoring another dog's point by backing him up, he could sometimes whip in ahead and steal the point. Only deft handling by his trainer, Judd Price, had saved the dog from being disqualified earlier for that canny trick. Judd Price had stopped him just in time when the judges were watching.

Jim Dyke knew of it as Chief and Bluestocking raced down the course at the judges' command to "put down your dogs!" He knew Chief would probably fall easy victim to the trick, if the thing could be put over while the judges' attention was momentarily drawn elsewhere, or both dogs happened to be out of sight. Chief was not only young and unseasoned, but had a sense of doggish ethics which might be a fine thing to admire, but which might work to his disadvantage against a ruthless rival like Bluestocking. Chief wouldn't steal another dog's point. Yet as Chief found the first bird, Dyke could see that Bluestocking had spotted the point and was swinging that way. Judd Price saw it, too, and likewise saw that the judges were watching. At a word from his owner, Bluestocking steadied and came up quietly behind Chief, honoring the latter's point.

As Jim Dyke lifted a hand, the nearest judge called out: "Show me game!" Dyke, carrying his gun ready, for at this field trial it was required that a bird be killed and the retrieve made after every point, walked in ahead of Chief. A great cock pheasant roared into the air. Dyke's gun spoke—once, and then again. But the strain of the competition had made him jumpy, for both shots were clean misses. With a raucous cry of derision, the cock pheasant sailed on.

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Chief, dropping obediently to wing and shot, looked at his master inquiringly. Bluestocking, with all the look of disgust that it is possible for a dog to express, got up and went hunting over to the left. Judd Price chuckled. But Dyke, flushed with mortification, merely waved his hand.

"Hie on!" he told Chief.

"The idea, Mr. Dyke," remarked the nearest judge acidly, "is to kill the bird!" Then, in kindlier tone: "Well, let's see him do it again!"

A moment later Bluestocking had a point, and Chief honored him. Judd Price made a clean kill. The bird had been handled perfectly, and Bluestocking was given proper credit. It was Chief's turn next, and both he and Dyke made good this time. So it went on down the course, a close battle all the way.

"Five minutes more," called a judge. That happened just as both dogs swung toward the willow run where Jim Dyke had encountered Blodgett weeks before.

AT sight of the familiar place, recollection of the bitter feud leaped into Dyke's mind once more. There was the spite fence, beyond which was forbidden ground. What if Chief, winding a bird, crossed the barrier? What if Bluestocking did likewise? There would be trouble, for Jim Dyke surmised that Blodgett was guarding every foot of where his land bordered the course. Dyke had seen Skipper hurrying along on the other side of the fence, eagerly watching the race. Yet the thing which happened was something which neither Jim Dyke nor anyone else could have foreseen.

"Three minutes more," announced the principal judge. He spoke hurriedly with his two fellow judges. "We make it a dead heat unless either dog finds game within the time limit," he informed Price and Dyke. As though in quick response, came Judd Price's triumphant cry: "Point!" Bluestocking had come to a full stop twenty feet from a clump of willows, his body stiff and straight as a ramrod from tip of nose to tail, his right forefoot lifted. Just behind him Chief likewise froze.

"Show me—" began the judge mechanically, but got no further, for hell erupted in the thicket.

A bird went roaring out of the place, startled into flight. Then there was a furious bellow, followed by a shrill, boyish scream. Then the pointing Bluestocking whirled and fled toward his master in panic. But Chief, obedient to the last, flattened as the bird took flight; then, with a snarling bark that seemed foreign to his apparently mild nature, he went charging into the depths of the willows. This much Jim Dyke saw as, frozen for a moment, he came to life.

Then he saw more. He saw Jeff Blodgett's prize bull, a red-coated monster, lunging at something on the ground, and he heard Skipper's cry again. He whipped up his gun to shoot, but it was too late, because Skagit Chief was already there in the willows, snarling in unleashed fury as it leaped for the fleshy folds of the bull's throat.

Chief's teeth locked fast for an instant, before the bull, with a powerful fling of its thick neck, sent the dog sprawling ten feet away. But an instant later Chief was back, all the old fighting instinct of a far-removed wolfish ancestry, the heritage of all dogs, coming uppermost as he slashed at the bull's flanks, turning the monster aside. Snap and leap back—each time the bull roared throatily as the sharp fangs cut through his hide and flesh. So

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anxious was the bull to get at his tormentor that he seemed to forget the boy lying on the ground. Yet Dyke dared not fire for fear of hitting the dog, whose movements were like sunlight upon a wind-rippled pool. Nor could he reach Skipper beyond the fence and in the depth of the willows. From behind him came confused shouts by the judges and spectators, yet none of them seemed able to help.

Dyke, desperately trying to crawl through the fence, suddenly saw the dog's body spinning end over end through the air. Somehow the bull had managed to hook one of those knobby horns into the loose skin of his foe. Roaring in triumph, the animal remembered the boy and lunged forward to finish him.

But his bellow was answered by a gunshot from the other side of the thicket. The bull faltered. Another shot, and he went down. Jim Dyke saw old Jeff Blodgett leap forward to where Skipper lay. Skagit Chief had fallen almost beside the boy.

SKIPPER struggled to a sitting position, shaking his head. There was a bleeding lump on one temple where a heavy hoof had struck him. Otherwise he did not appear hurt. Skagit Chief was likewise shaken and bruised, yet not seriously injured. He crawled forward to nuzzle Jim Dyke's hand.

Dyke and Jeff Blodgett stared hard at each other; then, suddenly, the light of feud died out of their eyes.

"If it hadn't been for you, Dyke," mumbled Blodgett, "that bull would have got Skipper, sure!"

"My dog, you mean," Dyke corrected him.

The other nodded. "Amounts to the same thing," he declared. "The dog wouldn't have been here unless you were here, too. I knew that bull was dangerous. Aimed to get rid of him long ago. But I was too stubborn, I guess! I even hoped he'd some day kill your dog!" He shivered at the admission.

"Because," he went on, "your dog was responsible, in a way, for that calf of mine being run to death. Skipper told me how it happened. That bull got him cornered once before when he and the dog were prowling after birds. There was a scrap, and the calf couldn't get out of the way. Your dog nipped him, probably by mistake. Anyway, it scared the calf so that it ran until it dropped. I knew *that*—but I was too stubborn to give in!

"I knew, too," he continued, "that Skipper was sneaking your dog out so that he could drive the birds off my land and back onto your course. I tried to stop him, but couldn't. Dyke, I've been a pretty mean neighbor! I don't expect you'll believe me when I say I'm right sorry! I know that this blasted bull, on top of my pigheadedness, probably has cost you this race. I've been watching and listening all day on my side of this spite fence—which is coming down tomorrow! Your dog has been hurt and can't run off the dead heat—"

"But there *is* no dead heat!" said the voice of the principal judge from behind them. "We've talked it over, and even Judd Price agrees that Skagit Chief won fairly. Bluestocking broke his point when the bull scared him. But Skagit Chief stood fast, even dropped to flush. So the final point belongs to him! Congratulations, Jim Dyke! As soon as you've taken care of your dog, come up for your prize."

THE END.

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A KILLER RIDES

BY HARRY R. KELLER

Ramon rides out from Vegas town
  Across the smoking sands.
His dark face wears a killer's frown,
  And blood is on his hands.
In Vegas, in a gambling den,
  He leaves a gringo dead.
Behind him ride avenging men;
  The desert lies ahead.

Above the bright and burning land
  A watchful buzzard swings.
There slithers now across the sand
  The shadow of its wings.

The sun dips to the desert's rim.
  The stars blaze down like flame.
Ramon rides on. His face is grim.
  His horse is growing lame.
The night is past. A fiery ball,
  The sun sears through the sky.
Ramon rides on. His tongue is gall.
  His rasping throat is dry.

A swirling wind torments the sand.
  Its hot breath crawls and clings.
And still above the burning land
  The patient buzzard swings.

Ahead there lies a desert sink,
  Beyond a dune's low brow;
A spring where man and beast may drink!
  Ramon is reeling now.
See! Yonder is the drinking place!
  He gives a strangled cry,
And falls upon his fevered face.
  The water hole is dry!

Above the bright and burning land,
  The buzzard lower swings.
It settles by the outflung hand,
  And folds its somber wings.

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Men called Kirby a fool for betting his outfit against that of a border-hopping rustler, but he knew that unless he could beat Deacon Evans at his own crooked game, there was no place for him in the cow country

All Lynn's future was staked on this ride—and Whiskey Jack was a killer who had never been topped.

DOOM TRAILS A BUCKAROO

BY ED EARL REPP

CHAPTER I

ROUNDUP REQUIEM

OLD JOSH KIRBY finished saddling his deep-chested steel-dust cow pony and stomped heavily back to the fire for a last cup of coffee. He drank it slowly and with grimace. Then he slung the tin cup into the dish pan and faced his watchful roundup crew.

"I thought I was running a cattle layout!" he shot at them suddenly. "It begins to look like I'm supporting a home for the infirm and string halted. The Rafter Fork started their calf roundup the same time we did. They've been done two weeks! Another week won't finish us and our tally is off four hundred from what it ought to be. What's the

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matter with you rannahans—can't you see a calf when you run over him?"

Josh had his hackles up over yesterday's poor count and the loss of a six-hundred-dollar bald-face herd bull. His gray jaw was shoved out like a fist. He had a predatory beak of a nose and sharp gray eyes that, now in his anger, burned like hot steel beneath bristling brows.

Three-bar Tully, Kirby's ramrod, glanced up from under the leather-bound brim of his tan, flat-crowned range hat. Tully was a heavy-boned, blue-jowled rider of forty, with curly black hair that grew down the back of his neck, ending under a soiled yellow neckerchief. His blunt features were burned a red-copper shade by savage Arizona suns.

"Deacon Evans' outfit is easier worked, boss," he argued.

"Easier worked!" bellowed Kirby. "The Rafter Fork neighbors us, don't it?"

"But we're all canyons and they're all flats. And I don't know as the Deacon's count was so much better than ours."

Color pointed up the leathery angles of Josh Kirby's face. The Bar L Slash crew all knew that he had been accusing Deacon Evans of cow stealing for years. But the old man bit his tongue, now, and kept still. Gray Evans, one of the Deacon's boys, was in camp repping for his father.

"Lily-fingered, rockin'-chair cowhands!" Josh threw at them. "Put this down in your tally books where you'll see it. Ary man don't bring in his share of cows today, he'll draw his time, and me shorthanded. You, Bronc, if any bull you chouse into the herd even looks like he'd been bulldogged, you'll git a bulldoggin' you won't soon forget. An' you can quit worryin' about that Calabasas Rodeo, because you're gonna be right here in these Sahuaro Hills, eatin' sowbelly for supper and ropin' calves all by yourself, without any sassy señoritas to throw kisses at you."

Bronc Sorrells' pug-nosed, rocky features reddened. He fooled with a spur rowel while the others grinned at him. Bronc was the lady's man of the outfit. But he was a top roping hand, and not afraid of anything that wore hair. The Calabasas Rodeo was usually a contest between him and Gray Evans for the money in the big events.

JOSH KIRBY'S head swiveled over at the rope corral to Lynn Kirby, his twenty-one-year-old son. Lynn evaded his father's contemptuous glance. Blood surged under his solid, regular features, making his face burn right up to the line of his crisp blond hair.

"Here it comes," Lynn told himself.

"I'm venting six hundred dollars' worth of your calves for that bald-face herd bull you killed yesterday," Josh barked. "I don't know why I keep tryin' to make a cowhand out of you. You can't wrangle hosses without spillin' 'em all over the prairie. You can't rope a calf without you pick a stump up with him. You ain't worth last year's corral apples on a bronc. But, by Jupiter, you're going to keep right on until I learn you something or bust your fool neck tryin'!

"Tully," he snapped, "take Lynn and Bronc and Gray with you up into Manzanita Canyon. There's about forty cows up there. I'll take the irons over to the mouth of Dutchman's Draw and have 'em hot when you bring the bunch in. Rest of you rattle your hocks and we'll

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keep the holdup there. Now, git out o' here."

They headed up through the rocky, broken canyon country into the foothills. Already, at six o'clock, the sun had a fierce thrust. Heat began to clog the canyons. The dry, loose, pebbly ground was hot and dusty.

Lynn rode beside Three-bar Tully. The big ramrod whistled as he jogged through the heavy brush. Behind them, Bronc Sorrells was cussing about missing the Calabasas Rodeo.

The men had already shucked off the dressing down Josh Kirby had given them. But Lynn couldn't. Always, hatred lay between him and his dad, waiting, like a snake, to be prodded into life.

LYNN KIRBY knew that the biggest thing Josh held against him was that he was not like his brother, Red, who was killed two years ago. Red had been all cowpuncher, a laughing, blunt-jawed, devil-may-care cowboy who was hell with the ladies and hell with a horse. Four years older than Lynn, Red was a ringer for their father, and he fell into the same reckless, hard-hitting mold.

From the first, it was Red whom Josh had groomed to take over the Bar L Slash when the time came for him to hang up his saddle. Red savvied cattle and horses. He knew how to buy and sell at a profit. The old man started a herd for each of the boys, paying them in calves instead of money as soon as they grew old enough to make a hand.

Red liked to make fun of Lynn's inexpertness with stock, forgetting that the boy was four years younger. Before Lynn was fifteen, Red egged him into trying to bulldog a big Chihuahua steer. Bulldogging was one of the things Josh Kirby frowned on. It was hard on cattle, and dangerous. But big Red, sneering at Lynn's hesitation, finally ribbed the youngster up to tackling the steer.

Lynn bedded down his ox. Bedded it down so hard that the steer's neck snapped and he turned a cat with Lynn underneath him. White-faced, shaking, the boy crawled out with a broken arm. By that time Red was scared, too.

"If you tell the old man about this," he panted, his face white under his flame-colored thatch of hair, "I'll whip thé livin' daylights out of you, busted arm and all! Tell dad your hoss throwed you. Savvy?"

That was the real start of Lynn's fear of cattle and horses. He was a blundering, sweating fool, working with a rope or busting a bronc. Once he overheard Bronc say to the boys: "When Lynn comes into camp it's just like two good men leavin'."

Big Josh Kirby was mortified that a son of his should not be the equal of any man in his crew. He tried to scare the kid into making a hand. Ridicule, threats, penalties—these were the tools he used. All the time he piled favors onto Red. Gave him money and his pick of the colts each spring. But Josh would have raised Cain had he known that Red spent most of the money playing poker in Calabasas with Deacon Evans' boys, Gray and Pike, and the likker-swilling crowd they ran with. Lynn knew, but he kept his mouth shut.

It was a smashing blow to the old man when Red was killed. It came suddenly, so suddenly and horribly that Josh Kirby would not believe for a while that it was really his boy that a boogered horse dragged into the ranch yard one sunup with his foot caught in the stirrup, his head

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battered by the rocks, and a dozen bullets in his body.

Why would anybody want to kill Red? Josh asked that question a thousand times of every man on the ranch. Had the cow-stealing, border-hopping Deacon Evans done it for spite? Had Red caught him rustling?

But Lynn, who knew why Red had been murdered, said nothing. He would rather the old man brooded his heart out than know the truth about the son who had been his favorite.

ON a ridge above Manzanita Canyon, Tully split the men up. There was no sign of the big, half-wild steers in the canyons and cross draws below them, but the punchers knew they'd be bushed up somewhere in the tobacco brush and dwarf juniper.

Three-bar Tully reached down and tightened his front cinch. This was country where it paid a man to be cautious. A chuck wagon couldn't come within twenty miles of the roundup camp through the jumbled Sahuaro Hills. Brush and rocks and canyon-riven hills made a puncher's life hell during the roundup. A man's rig had to be right, his horse had to be powerful and sure footed, and the rider had to be a top hand, or somebody was going to get hurt. Punchers used double-cinch, roping trees and breast rig to absorb some of the strain of stopping wild cows. Their hard-twist catch ropes had worn right through the leather horn to the steel core beneath.

"We'll start in the draws and work 'em down the canyon," Tully said. "Lynn, you hold 'em up down the canyon a piece, above the old man. Think you can cut 'er?"

Bronc and Gray Evans looked at Lynn, grinning. It was funny, asking a husky young fellow like Lynn if he could hold a bunch of cows in a narrow-walled canyon. Lynn was five-eleven and weighed two hundred pounds. His belly was as flat and corrugated as a washboard and his wide shoulders were square underneath his denim brush popper. His chest was deep and ribbed with tough muscle. The Bar L Slash boys had seen Lynn work with a rope often enough to know it wasn't lack of cow savvy that held him back, but lack of guts. He could headrope a big Chihuahua bull and spill the critter, and him afoot. His legs had the knee grip to hold almost any bronc.

Lynn turned his horse, without replying, and gigged him down the rubbly slope. Faintly, as he went down Manzanita Canyon, he heard a cowboy's wild yell and the crash of a half-ton steer being busted. Lynn Kirby wished fiercely that he had the guts to see the fun in risking your neck that way.

About a quarter mile above Dutchman's Draw, Lynn dismounted and tethered his horse in a black spot. Sitting back against a boulder, he built a cigarette. The canyon bottle-necked down here, so that one man could easily hold a bunch of cows. Lynn sat there over an hour, stewing in bitterness.

His mind counted the number of months before he'd have made up for killing the bald-face bull. Nearly half of his little herd of calves to pay for the critter he had fair-grounded as it dashed from a canyon mouth, mistaking it for an old graze bull. The animal's neck had been broken.

Suddenly Lynn heard them coming. His heart gave a wrench. He dived for his pony and hit the saddle without touching a stirrup. The boys were bringing them on the run!

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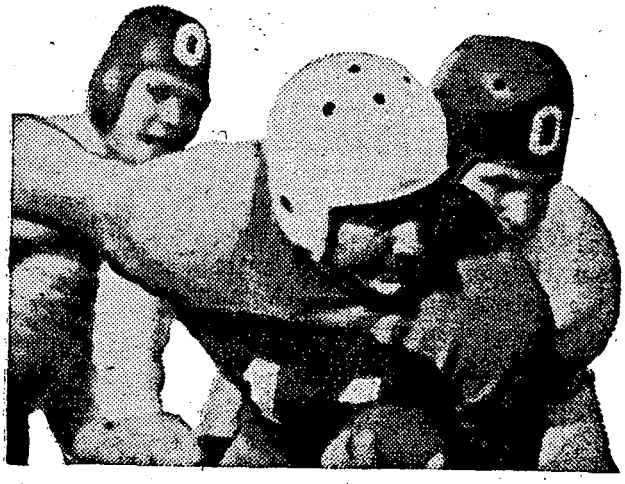
FLASH!



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Pouring those wild, scared cattle into the narrow canyon like an avalanche!

Waiting there in the middle of the trail, Lynn Kirby had the sickening sensation of a swarm of butterflies in his stomach. His heart pounded away like a piston. He tried to think how Bronc would do it. His gloved hand slipped the thong from the saddlehorn and he gripped his coiled rope, ready to swing it.

But when the ragged mass of cattle came around the turn, Lynn's muscles froze. The cow pony jumped sideways, and Lynn had to grab leather to hold on. He found himself being borne away in the front line of charging steers by the spooked horse.

Then, wildly, he began to flash the rope in front of the cows and yell. But they were past stopping that way. Two hundred yards reeled away like two ticks of a clock. It wasn't much farther to where Josh had his fires blazing. The old man's hearing was not what it used to be, and the walls of the canyon were steep. The bawling herd filled it like a head of muddy water.

Panic grabbed Lynn with the sight of the last bend above Dutchman's Draw. He did a crazy thing not even Bronc Sorrells would have done. Standing up in the stirrups, he let himself down on the scabby old longhorn bull in the lead, got the left horn in his left hand and kinked his right elbow under the other. Then he dropped.

His weight wrenched the animal's head over. The black horn, sharpened like a needle on scrub oak, dug into the sand. The bull's hind quarters lifted and came over like a semaphore. Under his hands, Lynn could feel the snap of vertebra. A great, hairy weight rolled upon him, crushing the air from his lungs.

Over and around him surged a wave of hoofs and dust and struggling bodies. Then it was gone. Through the dust Lynn saw the cows swinging past the bend. He had no time for pondering the miracle that he was still alive. Sweating, swearing in a tight, high voice, he got his leg from under the bull and ran down the canyon.

The cattle had passed on by the time Lynn came to the wide place in the canyon. Smoking, black embers lay all about. Branding irons were scattered for fifty feet. In the midst of all the wreckage lay Josh Kirby, his clothes torn, his hat gone, his blood seeping into the hoof-torn sand.

CHAPTER II

A COWARD BOSS FOR BAR L SLASH

JOSH lay dying in Lynn's arms. His blood-spattered features were rigid and expressionless, but his eyes clung to his son's, and he kept holding out his left hand as though it could tell something his tongue could not.

But all Lynn could see was that his father had been badly burned by a branding iron. Then Tully and Bronc and Gray Evans came racking in on the pound. Old Josh Kirby died a moment later.

Tully's flat-nosed face had a grayness under the black stubble of whiskers. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, kid! You said you could hold 'em!"

Lynn bounced to his feet. Anger dragged like a saw edge across the raw wound left by the horror of the last few minutes.

"You did it, Tully! You murderin' cow thief! You sent 'em down the canyon so's nobody could've stopped 'em!" He sprang for the big ramrod, his left hand extended

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to catch him by the neck, his right fist cocked.

Bronc Sorrells and Gray Evans jumped him before he could reach Three-bar.

"Easy, Lynn!" the bronc stomper said sharply. "Them cows did get out of hand, but I reckon they wasn't past stoppin'."

Lynn let himself be stopped. His breath came brokenly. What hurt worst was that he knew Bronc was right. It was that hesitation of seconds that cost his father's life.

Gray Evans' dusty lips grinned lopsidedly. Evans was a year or two older than Lynn, a lean, swart puncher with arrogant, Indian-sharp features.

"You shore take 'er hard, for a feller that just inherited a ranch," he remarked. "Some fellers would've waved them steers on, back there, and said to blazes with the old man!"

Lynn's eyes were the color of ice in a cave, but there were flecks in them like stirred coals. They found Gray's, and they were steady now.

"You wouldn't care to say that straight out?" he invited.

Gray turned away with a snort. Tully came forward, then, with a slap on the back for Lynn.

"Pawin' the hackamore won't help none now. Gimme a hand, boys, and we'll get the old man loaded on a hoss."

LEAVING Three-bar Tully in charge, Lynn pulled out for Calabasas, leading the horse that bore his father's body. He took Bronc and Sandy Burt with him. It was thirty miles to town, and they were until dusk reaching it. Early lights sprinkled the little Arizona cow town that lay in the shadow of a pipe-organ butte. A light evening breeze riffled the leaves of the cottonwoods as the men started down the main street.

There was a gaudiness to the town that went against the grain of Lynn's mood. Colored bunting decorated many store fronts. Placards were nailed against board fences advertising the rodeo that would start in a few days.

A knot of men in front of the Territory Bar straightened as the horses went by. Among them, Lynn saw Deacon Evans' black hat with its tall, stiff crown that made its wearer look like an undertaker.

Bronc reined in at the jail. "See you at the doc's. I'll bring Bob MacIvers."

Lynn stopped at Doc Prentiss' place. Prentiss saw him through the dusty window and hurried out. "Lynn, boy!" he exclaimed. "What's this?" But there was professional curiosity in the mortician's eye, and he seemed to be measuring old Josh even before Lynn had untied him.

"Give us a hand, doc," Lynn grunted. "I'll tell it when the sheriff gets here."

Sheriff MacIvers and Bronc came in as they were laying the mangled form on a table in the back. The men from the saloon were with them. They came into the shop awkwardly, no one speaking, but all listening.

Lynn's husky words made the only sounds in the funeral parlor. "He was tendin' branding fires, Bob. In a box canyon. Cattle got loose and dad couldn't get out of the way. His hearin' wasn't too good. Guess he never knowed till they were on him."

MacIvers nodded. He was a chunky man of less than medium height, with wide jaws and sober brown eyes. His gray mustache was trimmed square, and his lips were just as straight.

"They never built 'em any squarer

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than your dad, Lynn," he murmured. "Shore a shame he had to go. How'd them cows come to get loose?" Curiosity prompted the question, but a stab of guilt went through Lynn Kirby.

Sandy Burt, tall, sober-faced young horse breaker, looked as though he'd have liked to be back at camp. Bronc looked down at his feet. Lynn said, knowing every man there would carry his words away and twist them to suit himself: "It was my fault. I was s'posed to hold 'em. But they got away from me."

He paused. Then: "You won't need me?"

"I don't reckon so," MacIver answered. "If I do, I'll know where to find you."

Lynn knew those hungry ears would devour and disgorge the next thing he said, too. "Can you wait until Saturday for the burial, doc? All the boys will want to be there, and we're in the middle of roundup. Dad would r'ar up in his grave if he knew we dropped everything 'count o' him, and had it to do all over again."

"Whatever you say, my boy." Doc Prentiss rubbed his hands together.

Outside, Bronc grunted: "How about a drink and some chuck before we start back?"

Lynn nodded and they crossed the street to the Territory. With his glass just touching his lips, Lynn saw a wrinkled, smudged scrap of paper shoved along the bar in front of him. It was Deacon Evans who leaned against the bar beside him, smiling. Pike Evans, Deacon's youngest son, stood beyond.

THE Deacon was a cold-jawed man with lank black hair and cheekbones that stood up sharply beneath the tight flesh of his face. The high crown of his beaver-belly hat gave him unusual height. He wore an old Booger Red jacket and his neckerchief was drawn up tightly against his neck.

Lynn read the note. It was several seconds before he could believe that any man could have the nerve to show him a thing like that so soon after Josh's death. The note was in his dead brother's handwriting.

Pike Evans: I O U $850. Red Kirby.

"I thought, as a matter of honor, that you might like to pay it," the Deacon rasped. "Of course Red was of age, but—"

"I was thinking you'd been paid," Lynn said bleakly. "Think back, Deacon."

The Rafter Fork boss pulled his sandy brows together in a frown. His eyes went a little wider, scrutinizing the younger man sharply.

"I'm thinking back," he replied carefully, "but I can't say as I remember. What is it you're driving at?"

Lynn tossed off his drink. "Nothing. If you don't remember, I must be wrong. See you later, Deacon. So long."

"Just a minute!" Evans' long chin lifted. "There's something else, since you're not interested in clearing your dead brother's name. I'd like to buy that ranch of yours."

Lynn's eyes roved up and down the other's lanky frame. His lips grinned crookedly. "Deacon," he said finally, "you got the gall of a brass monkey."

Impatience clouded Evans' sallow face, flecked with those big liver-colored freckles. But it was Pike who answered.

"Don't git on the butt, cowboy!" Pike was of a shambling, loose-

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coupled make, his big shoulders sloping off into long, heavy arms. His jaws and chin wore a silky brown beard, skimpy, as if it had never known a razor. His eyes were squeezed against a large, high-bridged nose. "We come here tryin' to do you a favor, and you git breechy like a stud hoss in the spring. Git the hackles down! You'll never make a go of that place, with your old man dead."

"Why not?" Lynn asked quietly, his eyes glinting dangerously.

"Because you're no more a cowman than we are sheepherders! Even your old man couldn't make a hand out of you."

"You mean I'm yellow," Lynn suggested coolly.

Pike's shoulders lifted. "If the boot fits—" he grinned.

Lynn had been leaning by one elbow on the bar, his body appearing relaxed under the loose brush jacket and big Cheyenne chaps. Now that elbow snapped from the mahogany and his shoulders pivoted, and a big, hair-padded fist cracked against the point of Pike's chin. It made a sodden, bone and meat sound. Blood spurted from a split lip into Pike's chin beard. His eyes widened, staring, but they weren't seeing anything. His hands groped futilely for support, found none, and he went down like a shot beef.

Deacon Evans looked wrathfully at his son where he lay half on the brass rail and half in the sawdust. "Blasted, loose-mouthed puppy!" he muttered. "He asked for it. But that offer stands, Kirby, and I'd advise you to consider a long time before you pass it up. This range isn't the easygoing place it was when your dad came here. And, confidentially, Kirby—you aren't the cattleman he was, either."

CHAPTER III

BLOOD CANCELS A DEBT

LYNN, Bronc and Sandy spent the night at a line shack, when midnight overtook them far short of the camp. The things Deacon Evans had called up in Lynn's mind kept crawling through his consciousness. All the raw hatred he had known when Red was murdered flowed through him again.

Those last months of Red's life had been tough ones for Lynn. He saw his brother come in two or three nights out of a week, sodden drunk, after gambling sessions in Calabasas with Gray and Pike Evans and perhaps the Deacon himself. Red's money had come easy, and it went the same way. Lynn's fear was that their father would find out. It would hurt Josh. Hurt and enrage him, so that he might do something crazy like throwing Red off the place. And that would hurt the old man a lot worse than it would Red.

There was one night when Red was hours later than usual. Worried, Lynn saddled up and rode out to look for him, fearful that Red had got drunk and taken a fall from his horse.

Where the trail went through a dry wash, voices came to Lynn's ears. He stopped in a scope of greasewood and listened as Red rode by with the Deacon and his boys.

"I can't raise eight hundred bucks just like snappin' my fingers!" Red was complaining. "I'll sell my calves next fall. Give me until then."

"I'll give you nothin'!" The Deacon's voice had a hard bite to it. "Feller that can't pay his gamblin' debts, he shouldn't ought to gamble."

"I've got forty calves. They'll be worth twenty a head come fall."

Evans snorted. "Me feed 'em

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four months? I'll allow you ten dollars. You bring them forty calves over to my place tomorrow night and twenty of your old man's heifers. That's the best you're gonna get."

"What do you think I am?" Red snarled. "A yellow cow thief like yourself?"

"That'll go down on the books, too," Evans said frigidly. "Either you bring those cows over tomorrow night or I go to your old man for satisfaction. It'll shore be the devil on you, workin' for forty an' and no spendin' money for the askin'. Just by way of interest, bring along that buckskin colt of your kid brother's. Pike kind o' fancies it."

Lynn had almost given himself away by starting to cuss. He had taken that little buckskin colt in place of two months' wages. It was a year old, but already it had lines that took a man's eye. Now, Lynn wished he hadn't put off branding it. He waited for Red to tell the Deacon to go to blazes. But all he heard was the scuff of iron shoes as the Evans wheeled and headed home.

It was the next night that Red was murdered. But Lynn could not say anything, because it would only bring more grief for the old man. The cattle would be disposed of in a quick, border-hopping deal, more than likely, and the unbranded colt was no proof of anything.

So Lynn had filed all this away in his list of things to be taken care of when the time were right.

LYNN found out how a calf feels at a roundup of timber wolves when he rode back into camp the next morning. Neither by expression nor sotto-voce remarks did the Bar L Slash crew bare their hostility; but it lay between them and Lynn like a bright blade.

It was clear that Lynn had a man-sized fight on his hands. Mainly it would be a battle with himself. The boys would give him no real grounds upon which to base a showdown. But every man would be coasting on his spurs. Things would go wrong and nobody would be responsible.

The remuda would get boogered and the night hawk would let them spill all over the hills. The tally man would lose the beef sheet and there would be the devil until it was found. Steers would be brought in that had been run until long strings of slobber drooled from their mouths.

And it would all be intended to prove that Lynn Kirby wasn't man enough to run an outfit like the Bar L Slash.

Lynn started the morning circle determined to keep a dally on his temper. But by noon he was shaking with anger. He would have enjoyed taking each man, separately, and cleaning his plow for him. They were taking unfair advantage of the fact that he couldn't keep an eye on all of them at once.

Sandy Burt shoved a steer into the holdup with a horn broken from being bulldogged. Lynn saw spur marks on one that Bronc brought in. The roundup had turned into a farce. The boys were using it as a chance to get in trim for the rodeo, fair-grounding steers and calves and even throwing a rope surcingle about a steer and riding him.

Lynn had himself to battle with, too. He went into each cow chase with a cold cramping of his belly. He swung his loop stiffly, missing his throw as often as not. The rattle of one steer's hoofs on a scaly slope would magnify itself, in his mind, into the rumble of forty cows coming down a box canyon. Lynn took

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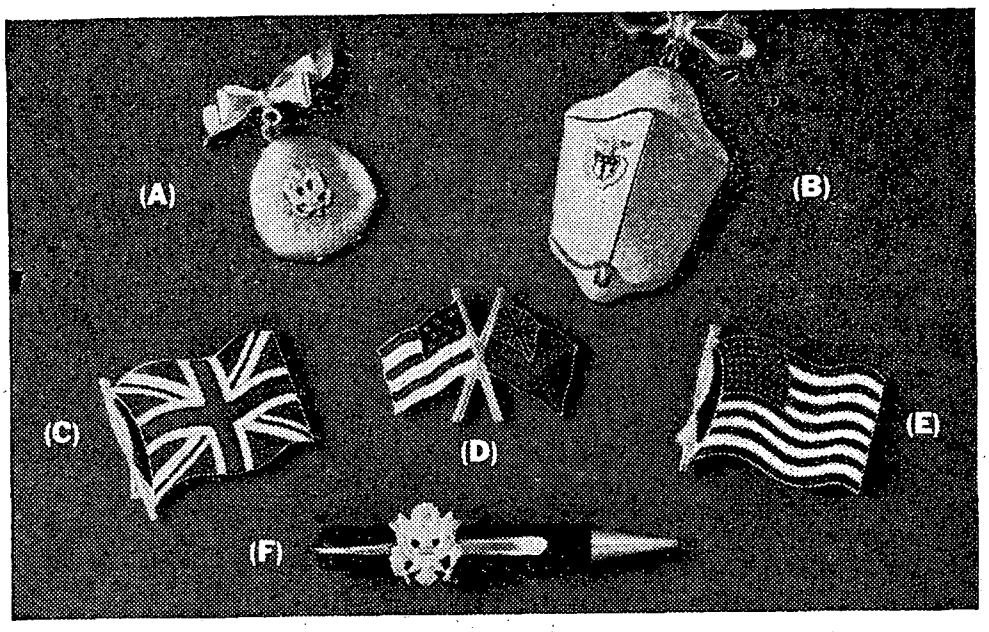

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needless risks, as if to see if he could scare himself out of cowardice. But at night he knew he was the same fumbling coward he had always been.

By dusk all the Bar L Slash hands were in. That alone would have brought a drumming from Josh Kirby. The final cord that held Lynn's temper snapped, when Gray Evans rode in.

The lank, swart, pale-eyed cowboy tossed a bloodstained muslin sack at Lynn's feet, where he stood checking the beef sheet. Lynn called him back as Gray went for his chuck.

"What's that?"

Gray's hard lips stretched a little at the corners, but he didn't grin. "Them's the ear tallies off some of my old man's Rafter Fork cows. Me and Tully range-branded 'em and I shoved 'em over onto our range. No use havin' to cut 'em out later. You can git the count from the ears."

"You jug-headed fool!" Lynn said angrily. "I'm not makin' a check up on ears—I want the cattle. Tully, is that all the sense you've got?"

"Don't break out in a rash," Three-bar Tully advised. "Your old man and me have range-branded a thousand steers in our time, if we've branded one."

"Mavericks!" Lynn rapped. "Back when there was hundreds of wild cattle running loose in the foothills. You never range-branded a cow on roundup when dad knew it." He kicked the sack of ear crops into the fire. "You two smart rannahans can screw your trees on again and keep riding until you find those cows."

There was a taut, nerve-strained second, with every man waiting to see how the segundo took the accusation. Tully's hard gray eyes were as unreadable as a slab of granite. Then he took off his hat and tossed it aside.

"'Less'n you want that purty hat spoiled," he said softly, "you'd better take it off. Because, mister, you're in a scrap!"

LYNN shucked off his Powder River hat. Then with a rush the big ramrod was on him. Lynn tried to duck a left hook and stepped slam into a right to the jaw that shook him clear to the back of his head. Tully came after him like an angry bull, then, battering with fists and elbows. Lynn never got a chance to draw a breath. He was tough and fast, but he wasn't a saloon scrapper like Three-bar Tully.

All Tully savvied was to win. His head low, he bored in. His fists spatted against his opponent's bloody face and head. Never letting Lynn catch his balance, he slugged and chopped and crowded him backward at a stumble. Tully put a punishing twist into his blows that brought involuntary grunts of pain from Lynn. The puncher's blond head wobbled loosely.

Lynn Kirby was whipped from the start. Out of one blow he would weave into another. The ramrod never let him get his two feet under him, never let him cock his fist. All the younger man could do was paw at Tully as he stumbled backward.

Lynn's spur snagged in a bedroll. It was Three-bar Tully's hand that shot out and kept him from falling, but at the same time his other fist was driving in. Bruised, bloody knuckles bit into Lynn's jaw with the solid sound of an ax splitting a block. His knees folded under him and he went down, lying on his face with legs doubled up and arms outflung.

Someone threw a dipper of cold

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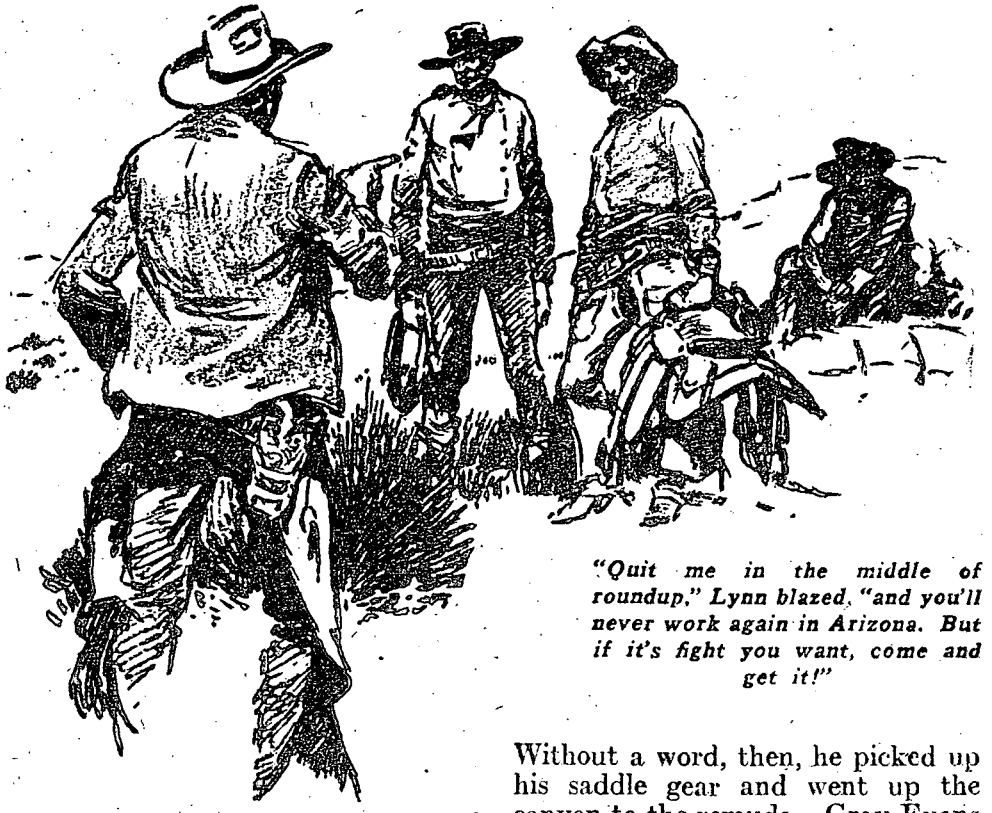

"Quit me in the middle of roundup," Lynn blazed, "and you'll never work again in Arizona. But if it's fight you want, come and get it!"

water on his head and he stirred from his stupor. Bronc Sorrells put a half-pint bottle of whiskey in his hand and Lynn let thirsty gulps of the burning liquor go down his throat before he stood up. His roving glance picked out Three-bar Tully, bending over a roll of blankets he was tying with a rope.

"What's the idea?" Lynn's voice was shaky.

Tully did not look around. "Quittin'."

"If you quit me in the middle of roundup the Association will blackball you all over Arizona!" Lynn grated. "You can't quit until I fire you. And right now my orders are for you to bring in those cows. You and Evans."

Tully straightened. He still had not turned. His broad back hid a face that murder had a claim on. Without a word, then, he picked up his saddle gear and went up the canyon to the remuda. Gray Evans trailed him.

It was daylight before the pair returned. They had the cattle, eight coming yearlings with fresh Rafter Fork brands and earmarks. To Lynn's critical eye, the ear crops were cut too far down, as if the ears had been cropped months ago and another half inch trimmed off last night to make them appear freshly cut.

Lynn had never fully trusted Three-bar. He was certain of the man's stripe now. Tully had helped Gray Evans steal eight cows. They didn't dare bring the animals in for inspection this soon, with the blotted brands still fresh along the lines that had made a Bar L Slash over into a Rafter Fork. Instead, they had rounded up eight bona fide Rafter Fork steers for examination, doctoring them carefully.

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In the midst of examining the brands, Lynn turned to see a horse and rider coming down off the bank into the canyon-bottom camp. It was Sheriff Bob MacIvers. The graying, middle-aged lawman accepted a cup of coffee and drank it without saying much more than howdy.

"What's on your mind, Bob?" Lynn demanded finally. "You didn't come up here to see how I was doin'."

"No, I didn't," the lawman drawled. "I came up to ask you one thing. Why you didn't mention that there was a .44 bullet in your dad's left lung?"

CHAPTER IV

KILLER STRIPES

SILENCE came down over the Bar L Slash camp like a thick, suffocating fog. In Lynn's ears there was a roaring, the sound of blood rushing through his head.

"Say that again, sheriff." His voice sounded to him like someone else speaking from far off.

MacIvers' wide jaws were set like cement. His compressed lips barely moved under the gray mustache. His eyes were dark, accusing slots.

"I'm saying it wasn't cattle that killed Josh Kirby! A bullet in his lung done that job. And it's mighty peculiar to me that you didn't mention it."

"I didn't know about it. That's a fact." About Lynn, excitement was beginning to roil like mud stirred up in a ditch. But Lynn's mind seemed to hold itself apart. Neither fear nor horror found the door to it. This one thing stood out blackly against the formless gray of his unpatterned thoughts: that he hadn't killed Josh.

"I'm taking your gun. Don't make a fuss," MacIvers warned.

Lynn's eyes, as the lawman took the Colt from his chaps' pocket, settled for an instant on Three-bar Tully. Then they shifted to Gray Evans.

"You and me are going to town," MacIvers grunted. "There'll be a coroner's inquest tomorrow. Tully, can you clean up here today? I'll want the whole gang of you for questioning."

"Sure." Tully's eyes, lead gray against the deep tan of his face, bore steadily upon Lynn. "We'll be there, and ready to tell what we know. It ain't much, but maybeso we'll git justice done."

Bronc Sorrells stared after the pair as they rode down the canyon, a puzzled frown between his eyes. "I'll be dehorned if Lynn don't look plumb happy about it!"

"Loco, I reckon," Sandy Burt muttered. "Plumb loco!"

Lynn Kirby was glad of the day in jail. It gave him a chance to corral all those maverick thoughts of his.

That night Lynn slept soundly for the first time in days. Looking out his cell window, he watched the Bar L Slash boys ride into town about eleven the next morning. None of them came to see him. The Territory Bar swallowed them and somewhat later Sheriff Bob MacIvers went in to get the outfit.

When Lynn was conveyed to Doc Prentiss' establishment, he found the little front room packed. The coroner's jury sat on chairs and boxes. Josh Kirby lay in a covered box in the back. MacIvers put Lynn in a seat and motioned Doc Prentiss to proceed. Prentiss was coroner as well as town undertaker.

Lynn, as Prentiss gave the hearing an official starting spin, looked over the jury. There were friends of

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his dad's, like chin-bearded old Cort Adams; enemies like Deacon Evans, his liver-spotted face freshly shaved, lank black hair hanging over his ears. Twelve men who would weigh the facts and decide who was to be held for trial in connection with the murder of Josh Kirby.

Doc Prentiss pointed at Threebar Tully. "You was there, Tully. What happened, as you recall?"

Tully stood up, big and a little out of place in heavy bullhide chaps and brush jacket, his curl-brimmed Stetson in his hands. "I took Lynn and Gray and Bronc with me up Manzanita Canyon. Bronc and Gray went up to the head of the canyon. I rode up Coyote Canyon. Lynn was to hold the cattle just above Dutchman's Draw. But he spilled 'em, and when we got there his old man was dyin'." He scratched the back of his neck. "I don't know as he even tried to hold 'em. Wasn't no sign of it."

"Yes, there was." Bronc spoke from the back. "There was that bull with a busted neck up the canyon a piece."

Tully sat down without looking at Bronc. Prentiss called on Gray Evans. Gray's story was the same as the ramrod's, and afterward Bronc verified them both.

"Then," Prentiss frowned, "there was maybe an hour and a half when Lynn was within a quarter of a mile of his dad. That right, Lynn?"

Lynn nodded. "But Tully was just as close!" he said, the strident tone of his voice straightening all the jurymen in their chairs. With the room waiting for him to enlarge, he turned to Bronc.

"Where does Coyote Canyon begin?"

"Below Granite Ridge."

"And what's over the ridge from it?"

"Dutchman's Draw."

Lynn's eyes glinted. "And it wasn't a half mile down Dutchman's Draw to where dad was waiting with the irons! There was plenty of time for Tully to ride down there and back before the herd shaped up."

"Why should I?" Tully snapped.

"To save your job! To dodge a trip to the pen!"

HERE'S what I'm trying to say." Lynn hurried on before the room could grow noisy with comment. "We'll say Tully's been drawin' pay from some border-hoppin', wet-cattle ranch to supply it with beef. Let's say he was range-weanin' calves at three months. Maybe he had a bunch up Manzanita Canyon and was tryin' to get rid of 'em, but the chance never come. Things kept draggin' along until the roundup outfit was getting too close to where he had these calves.

"He still had a few days. But the old man jumped the gun on him by going five miles out of the way to work Manzanita Canyon that morning! Any man in the bunch will tell you it was outside our circle. Dad was getting plenty on the peck about the count dropping. I think he was watchin' Tully pretty close. When we combed Manzanita Canyon, a lot of these grass-eatin' three-month calves would show up, and somebody'd sweat. Tully did the only thing he could to protect himself. He ducked out and shot the old man. He sent the cows down the canyon so fast I couldn't hold 'em. But even dad getting cut up by the herd didn't hide that bullet."

Excitement broke the spell left by Lynn's hurried words. Threebar Tully was on his feet, staring at Lynn as though undecided what to

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do or say. Then Doc Prentiss was shouting for order.

"That's fine," he told Lynn. Sarcasm twisted his mouth. "Nice deduction. Only—can you prove it!"

Lynn went to where his father's body lay in the covered box. He pulled aside the sheet. "I call on Bronc to witness that dad was nowhere near any of the fires or branding irons. And yet the last thing he did was to show me a burn on his hand—that had been put there before the cattle ran over him. He burned it himself, hoping to tell who shot him. Have a look, doc. The left hand."

Doc Prentiss gingerly turned up the palm of the dead man's left hand, while men crowded about. On the waxy flesh were burned three deep stripes.

Sheriff Bob MacIvers got it first. "Three bars!" he croaked. *"Three-bar Tully!"*

There was the crash of a chair falling, the noise of a brief struggle. Lynn whirled, to see men milling about a window that opened on an alley. Bronc's yell hit the low ceiling.

"He's out the window! Git him!"

The big Bar L Slash ramrod was out of sight when the yelling mob poured into the alley. They mushroomed out into the back street and split up a dozen ways.

Sheriff MacIvers was trying to get some order into the search. But it was like curbing a bunch of hounds smelling out a rabbit. They were scurrying off in every direction. Finally Bob gave it up and went with them.

When an hour had passed this way, the hot spur of the chase cooled and a building-to-building search was begun. But system had entered the hunt too late. The posse met again in the mortuary a couple of hours later, without having turned up a smell. Doc Prentiss reconvened the jury and a charge of murder was brought against Three-bar Tully.

Bronc and Sandy were with Lynn as he left. "All we got to do now," Sandy said disgustedly, "is find him."

That night they wandered out to the rodeo field at the end of town where last preparations were going on for the three-day show that would open the next morning. They sat on a high chute bar and talked. It was as if the barrier between them was down. But Lynn knew it was a spurious victory he had won. Inside him, there was still a battle to be fought.

Lynn told them about Red. About his suspicion of Deacon Evans. It was like raising a weight from his chest to bring those things out in the open.

From the direction of town came the brisk clatter of many hoofs. As the riders came into the light of the lanterns hanging behind the judge's stand, Lynn saw that they were driving a bunch of rodeo stock for Deacon Evans. Evans supplied the rodeo, for a price, with some of its best bucking horses and wild steers.

The Deacon was in the group of riders chousing the animals into the pens. His glance flashed to the trio on the chute bars. A moment later he rode up.

His thin lips had a sour warp as he singled out Lynn Kirby.

"Did you have anybody in particular in mind when you talked about a certain wet-cattle dealer today, Kirby?" he demanded bluntly.

"Like Pike says," Lynn replied, "if the boot fits, pull 'er on."

Evans' eyes made tiny points of light in his shadowed face. "Maybe you ain't noticed," he said after a

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pause, "but this country is shore shrinkin' down. It's got so a Rafter Fork man can't spit without foulin' a Bar L Slash puncher's boots. Looks like there'd be some right mean trouble, unless one party decides to drag his wagons."

Lynn's brows tilted. "We're gonna miss you, Deacon."

Evans smiled. "I might be persuaded to get out!"

Lynn glanced in surprise at Bronc. "What's your price?" he asked cautiously.

The Deacon chuckled. "It's not so easy as that. I want to make a bet with you. You think you've got some tolerable riders in your string, don't you?"

"If there's better, I ain't seen 'em."

"Well, you're going to. I'll put my ranch up against yours that the Rafter Fork takes more money in tomorrow's riding than your outfit!"

"Tell the slimy snake to go to the devil!" Bronc Sorrells cut in angrily. "He's got some tinhorn trick up his sleeve."

But the size of the thing took Lynn's breath. "That's a bet I could like," he breathed finally. "How'll I know you won't welsh?"

"We'll both put quitclaims on our outfits into MacIver's hands. He's one of the judges. Everything will be on the square."

Lynn slid down off the bars. "Deacon, you've made a bet. My iron against yours; my boys against yours. And hot lead for the man that welshes!"

CHAPTER V

A BET IS PAID IN HELL

THE morning sun's gold splashed on a Calabasas stirred by currents of rumor. Of Three-bar Tully there was no news. But his escape was almost forgotten in the interest that focused on the winner-take-all bet between Lynn Kirby and Deacon Evans.

By starting time the stands were a colorful jam of yelling townspeople. Lynn, waiting behind the judge's stand, felt the cold thrill of excitement go into him. In his belly there was that queasiness he always felt before he tackled a big steer or forked a bronc. Lynn had not counted on entering anything but the calf roping. But there had been no way out of taking a number in the bronc riding and bulldogging. He knew what a cow town thought of any man who didn't have enough faith in himself to fight for his own money.

The Bar L Slash and Rafter Fork drew about even in the calf roping and bareback bronc riding. But the bulldogging and saddle bronc riding were ahead. It was these big-money events that would decide the winner.

The announcer's voice jarred through Lynn. "The lap-and-tap bulldogging contest, folks! Watch Chute 3; Pike Evans coming out!"

To limit the number of contestants, the judges had cut it down to three men for each ranch. Lynn climbed the bars in time to see Evans leave the barrier at the same instant as the bull. Gray was hazing for his brother. They made a smooth team. Gray threw the big gray bull at Pike and the lean cowpuncher dropped onto the brute. Dust churned as he dragged the animal to a stop, then put on the pressure to wrestle him down. His hand shot up.

"Eleven seconds!"

The time was good, but Lynn had no opportunity to worry about it, as his own name rang across the field.

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He rode his pony into the barrier, sick clamminess inside him.

The gate went open with a crash. Lynn chilled when he saw the rangy bull with long black horns whetted like swords on stiff scrub brush. Fear, for an instant, had his muscles locked. When finally he swatted the horse with the bat, the bull had a touch lead. It seemed an hour that Lynn raced alongside him, measuring for a clean drop.

In the instant that he left the stirrups, the animal swerved. Lynn had the rough feel of scabby hide under his fingers as his hands slid across the huge neck. The next moment he was crashing to the dirt, rolling over and over in a swirl of dust.

He lay there a moment, stunned. There was an ache in his left leg that told him a bone had been broken. But when he sat up and gingerly flexed it, the leg was all right but so cramped and stiff that he could hardly walk off the field.

During the rest of the event, Lynn sat up on the scarred chute bars, numbed to the excitement that swept the stands. Gray Evans made a sensational throw that brought the crowd to its feet, screaming. Eight seconds! Sandy Burt made a dog fall and his time was not accepted. Bronc Sorrells saved a clean wipe-out for the Bar L Slash by winning second money.

A brittle tension kept the Bar L Slash men's lips pressed hard together as they waited for the broncs to be brought up to the holding pens. There was the same gnawing thought in each man's mind: That the Bar L Slash had to take not only first bronc money, but second or third to boot, to have a chance.

"Keep your eyes on Chute 4, folks!" The crowd of riders in back fell silent. "It's Whiskey Jack, Bronc Sorrells up!"

WHISKEY JACK!" Sandy Burt's jaw muscles bulged. He glanced into the chute at the struggling buckskin bronc waiting to be saddled. "They've jobbed us, Lynn! That's that murderin' brute that killed a man at Prescott. He's been barred!"

Lynn's glance flicked to the judge's stand. Sheriff MacIvers was arguing with the other judges.

"That's how she stacks up," Lynn muttered. "We've got a man on the stand but the Deacon's got two. You ain't going to ride that brute, Bronc. From what I hear, he's murder."

Bronc's ugly face grinned. "'Never was a hoss that couldn't be rode!'" he quoted.

"'An' there never was a man that couldn't be throwed,'" Sandy finished glumly, watching Bronc trot over to the chutes.

Sandy and Lynn climbed the bars. Their first good look at the notorious Whiskey Jack came as the bronc came out of the chute in a series of pitching lunges. Lynn's nerves twanged like fiddle strings.

What was so familiar about the horse? A big, heavy-muscled buckskin, it had black stripes about the knees and down the spine. Trouble marks, in cowboy parlance. The certainty grew, in Lynn Kirby, that he had had dealings with that bronc somewhere.

Whiskey Jack was a mean bucker, a savage brute with the hatred of man in his heart. His sunfishing plunges kept Bronc's head jerking like the head of a rag doll. Cowboy yells were pounded out of him. But he kept his spurs flashing in a wicked circle-saw swipe that drove Whiskey Jack crazy.

Then, without warning, the buckskin stopped bucking and headed

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for the high fence. Bronc yanked the bucking rein, swatting the horse over the head to stop him. Ten feet short of the fence Whiskey Jack buried his head and planted on his front feet.

Bronc Sorrells' body arched over the buckskin's head. Wood splintered in the sudden quiet, as the puncher came down headfirst on the whitewashed poles. Whiskey Jack wheeled and loped away. But Bronc lay still.

The rodeo doctor was working over him when Lynn came shouldering through the crowd.

"How's he look, doc?" Lynn demanded anxiously.

"Busted collar bone. Maybe a skull fracture. I can't tell that yet."

Lynn groaned. Their shoulders sagging, he and Sandy stood there until after Bronc had been carried off the field.

The starting gun popped. Gray Evans was out on a chunky little blue pony. He made a beautiful ride, contesting that bronc crazy, spurring and yelling, until past the ten-second limit. The pick-up men lifted him off the horse, and a roar swept across the field.

They were calling for Sandy now. Thought of the bet had almost left Lynn's mind in worry for Bronc. But Sandy's fingers, biting his shoulder, brought him back.

"See where that leaves us, Lynn? You and I've got to take the money alone—first money, and second or third! You can't let up now!"

Lynn let himself be herded over to the chutes. He saw Sandy Burt go out like a wild man in the saddle. Saw Gray Evans, a streak of blood under his nose from the racking ride he had made, watch Sandy with cold, pale eyes. It was a thrilling ride, maybe a first-money ride. But Lynn was recalling that they were outnumbered on the judge's stand. It would have to be a real exhibition that would win for the Bar L Slash; something so breathtaking the judges wouldn't dare cheat the rider out of a win.

ANOTHER Rafter Fork man came out of the chutes. Midway in his ride he blew a stirrup and was thrown. Then through the crowd noises came the words Lynn had dreaded.

"Next rider—Lynn Kirby!" The announcer paused, staring at the slip of paper he held. "The horse—*Whiskey Jack!*"

"To hell with them!" That was Sandy's snarling voice at Lynn's ear. "We'll protest to the association. The murderin' rats!"

"This isn't an association show," Lynn muttered. "We take what we get. And I'm riding that jughead."

Sandy tried to hold him by the arm, but Lynn struck him off. He climbed the scarred bars and straddled the chute above the squealing, fighting buckskin killer. He looked down. The saddle, the horse, the handlers—the whole scene swam in a blur. Into him came the host of terrors he had lived with so long.

Then he was letting himself down into the big bucking saddle. He fished for the stirrups, got the cotton bucking rein in his grasp. The bronc's back hunched. Suddenly Lynn was sick. He couldn't do it.

With a wrench of terror he saw the gate fly open! The buckskin was out and pitching into the field. They had jobbed him again; sent him out before he gave the signal!

The cantle cracked him in the back; the swell jarred his hip bones. He was riding all over the horse. Whiskey Jack knew his rider was off balance and made the most of it.

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Pitching fence-cornered, sunfishing, pile-driving with bone-racking jars that telescoped a man's spine.

Lynn knew a dull incredulity that he hadn't been dislodged. Then he made the amazing discovery that his body was anticipating each act of the crazy brute even while his mind was paralyzed. His muscles, jarred into a familiar pattern of reactions by the shaking saddle, were functioning smoothly.

Suddenly Lynn Kirby was getting the rhythm of it—the feel of riding with a bronc, not fighting him. Letting him fight you, but always keeping one jump ahead of him. Always keeping your spurs in his shoulders when he came down. Raking him as he went up again and always keeping your knees tight under the swell.

That moment fear left Lynn Kirby. Inside him there was an uprush of fierce joy. He chopped the spurs into Whiskey Jack's shoulders and left trails of blood all the way back to the bucking strap. Straight up the bronc went, and down on his forefeet. Lynn sat to his wild pitches with a body that was loose and legs that clung like a spring-steel hackamore bit. He heard the whistle blow. Saw the pickup men start for him.

Lynn waved them off. For the next minute he gave Whiskey Jack

It was plain suicide to try to bulldog the leader of those stampeding longhorns, but with old Josh's life in the balance, Lynn tried.

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the kind of a spurring rodeo broncs have nightmares about. The buckskin, his murderous tricks countered, was ready to quit. But the bronc stomper on top of him kept spurring, driving him to a squealing fury of desperation.

Whiskey Jack finally stopped. His legs spread like the uprights of a saw horse, his head down; he refused to buck. Lynn let up on him and loped the sweating, blood-flecked brute over to the stands.

While the Bar L Slash gang pounded him on the back, yelling, Lynn watched where they took Whiskey Jack. Because he remembered, now, where he had known the buckskin.

Up on the judge's box they were making an announcement. "First money in the bronc riding goes to Lynn Kirby!" The yelling surged higher, then quieted. "Second money, Gray Evans. Third—Pike Evans!"

THE faces of the Bar L Slash punchers altered like wax masks in a fire. Lynn anticipated their explosions of anger with a quiet warning.

"Easy! We've won, only they don't know it yet."

Through the milling throng they were coming toward them, the Deacon and his boys, Bob MacIvers and the judges.

MacIvers' face was an apoplectic red. "You want to register a complaint, Lynn, before I turn this quitclaim over to Evans?"

The Deacon watched Lynn, his sallow features watchful. "I don't reckon he does. We made an agreement about welshing—"

"No complaint," said Lynn. "But I'd like to take a look at that Whiskey Jack hoss."

Whiskey Jack was alone in a pitching pen. Nearby were a half-dozen wagons loaded with hay for the stock. Lynn was able to walk up to the buckskin now. Deacon Evans and his boys, and Sandy and the sheriff, ducked through the bars. The buckskin wore a Rafter Fork brand and a couple of unfamiliar brands.

"What're they?" Lynn pointed at the strange tally marks.

Evans looked queerly at him. "Texas brands. Bought the hoss in Dallas. That's the owner's Lazy J and a county brand."

"Whiskey Jack ever had swinney?"

There was, among the Deacon and his boys, a certain uneasiness.

"Not since I bought him," replied Evans guardedly.

Lynn was probing the buckskin's muscled shoulder with his thumb. Finally he let it rest on a small scar.

"I had a horse looked just like this one," he said suddenly. "He disappeared the night Red was murdered. I mind the night before that. Red was later than usual, and I went out looking for him. I heard you and Red talking in a dry wash, and you were telling him to steal twenty of the old man's cows and a buckskin colt of mine to help pay off a gamblin' debt. He did it, all right, and all he got for a receipt was a handful of slugs!"

"You tryin' to get yourself shot?" Deacon Evans snarled.

"Put your finger here, Bob." Lynn ignored the outburst. The sheriff felt of the shoulder. "That colt had swinney a couple of months before he was rustled. Surest cure I know of for swinney is to cut a slit where the skin is beginning to stick to the bone from perishin' away, and slide a dime under. That's how I done with Whiskey Jack. And like a

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kid, I put my initials on the dime. If we was to cut right here—"

A VOICE with a snarling twist to it came from the wagons beyond the pens. "H'ist 'em, boys! Back out of there, Deacon, while I hold 'em. Purty soon I'm gonna put a slug right between that rannahan's eyes!"

It was Three-bar Tully's voice, but of Tully there was no evidence. Grabbing at his gun, Deacon Evans swore and backed away. Pike stumbled after him, still stunned by the swift dissipation of the victory they had only tasted. He was halfway through when Lynn scooped his own Colt from leather.

A gun crashed beyond the corral, the sound strangely muffled. Lead ripped through Lynn's side, the searing, stinging force of it knocking the wind out of him. He saw Pike raise his gun to fire; heard a thunderous roar almost at his ear, and watched the lean, wolfish puncher slide from the corral pole to the hoof-churned dust.

Still Lynn's eyes searched among the wagons. A jerky movement from Gray Evans snagged his attention, so that his gun hand snapped to cover him. He fired in the same instant as the swarthy Rafter Fork man. A slug chipped bark off the corral bar at his side. Evans hit high, reeled backward into the fence. A second shot doubled him up.

Deacon Evans had made it through the bars and was dodging through the wagons. Sheriff Bob MacIver's warning shout followed him, but the Deacon kept running. Resting the gun barrel across his forearm, MacIvers drew a bead on the zigzagging, high-shouldered figure.

Lynn's attention was suddenly brought to one of the hay wagons. A drifting ribbon of smoke curled from the bottom of the mound of hay. Again a shot banged out. A bullet snarled close to Lynn's face. He threw down, firing twice, the second roar piling on top of the first.

Inside the mound of hay there was a quick convulsion. Then the hay ceased to move. A gray tatter of smoke was caught by the breeze and pulled from the barrel of the gun jutting from the wagon. The State had been saved the expense of executing Three-bar Tully.

MacIvers' shot had caught the Deacon in the side as he dodged into a clearing between two wagons. Evans went down in full stride and his tall hat caved against the felloe of a wagon. The Deacon's hands clawed jerkily at the spokes. Then the clutching fingers slid away, releasing in that same instant everything he had tried to bring within his grasp, and failed.

There were some changes made out at the Bar L Slash in the next few months. Big changes, that involved a lot of work for all hands. Building cattle traps, digging tanks, scattering weed seed on barren spots. For three months the Bar L Slash outfit worked like slaves. Some of the boys threatened to quit and Bronc said he wished he'd got a fracture instead of a concussion, so that he'd have been laid up until after Lynn got over this brain fever of his.

But no man did quit, and there was a closer feeling between boss and puncher than the outfit had ever known. A cowhand will take a lot from a boss who is the outfightin'est, outridin'est, and outropin'est hand in the bunch—and not such a poor bunch at that!

THE END.

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TRAIL SIGN FOR THE LAW

BY MOJAVE LLOYD

Little Wing Duck's chances of being alive to celebrate the Fourth weren't worth a plugged peso once he discovered he was packing a wagon load of desperate killers out to his mine.

WING DUCK was in the alley that night when the bank was robbed. His covered wagon and team of mules were beside the loading platform behind Manning's Mercantile. Wing Duck himself was in his wagon, fingering over a handful of small American flags.

On the corner stood the Odd Fellows Hall. Next to it came Manning's Mercantile, then the Mother Lode Bank. West of the bank was Cy Bondy's Honkatonk, where the boyish pleasures of miners and cowhands were just then raising pandemonium fit to stop a Chinese funeral procession.

The four men walked their horses quietly into the alley from the side street and swung in under Manning's shed, across the alley from the loading platform. It was too dark for Wing Duck to see much, but, curious as a chipmunk, he lifted the flap of the canvas top of his dilapidated wagon a trifle and peeked out.

The four men came out from un-

Wing meant for the horse to stampede, but the sad part was that he took the little Chinaman along.

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der the shed. Each one carried a rifle and wore a holstered six-shooter, the same being standard equipment in Tiprock and no cause for comment. Without a word, they separated.

Two of them passed within arm's length of the hidden Wing Duck. But all the scrawny little Chinese pocket hunter could make out was that the chunkier of the two was wearing a black eye patch. They strolled out to the side street and turned left around the corner of the Odd Fellows Hall, toward Main Street and the front of the bank.

One of the other two, a fat waddling man carrying something rolled up under his left arm, stopped beside the steps leading up to the bank's alley door. That kept him just out of line with the beam of light shining through the barred window glass in the door's upper half.

The fourth man was so thin Wing Duck named him Chopstick, but learned later, to his sorrow, that the bandit went by the name of Bones. He slid sidewise into the gap between Manning's and the bank, an opening so narrow you wouldn't have thought any human could have squeezed into it. The lighted windows of the barber shop on the far side of Main Street put this skinny gentleman in sharp silhouette.

The tiny Chinaman watched tensely. He was glad the office of Andy Salt, the sheriff, was clear over beyond Main Street, on the bank of Singing River. Salt would have spoiled this kettle of fish.

Chopstick slid along to within a step of a small ventilator window in the bank's side wall. The night

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was sultry and the window was open. Lamplight shone through it. Chopstick intently watched the street end of the narrow gap he was in. So did Wing Duck, with his snub nose wrinkling thoughtfully.

Charley Cousins, the cashier, would be at work in the bank. He always worked Friday evenings, making up the pay rolls for the mines thereabout. The safe would be open and Charley would be counting out pile after pile of gleaming gold coins and crackling currency, and tying it all up in buckskin sacks. He would be thinking little or nothing of going to join his buried ancestors.

Wing Duck was an orderly soul. Next to Haiphong, the holy city of his birth, and America, the land of his adoption, he loved peace and order, plans well laid and carried out with diligence and devotion. Here was something he could look upon with admiration. The Mother Lode Bank was being robbed with a perfection of method beautiful to behold. Wing Duck smiled and patted his belly and watched.

There was but one weevil in the rice bowl. If these sinister gentlemen discovered that he was a witness to their labors, something told Wing Duck that his own ancestors would soon have company. He wriggled lower into his load of supplies, jammed his gnarled little body

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down between a sack of rice and a keg of whiskey.

JUST the feel of that two-gallon keg brought warmth to Wing Duck's celestial soul. The whiskey therein was something very special. True, it had begun as ordinary rotgut. But in the knowing hands of Wing Duck's crony, Ah Quong, the café man, that rotgut had taken aboard a load of other mysterious ingredients that transformed it into a magic brew of heavenly delight. What it would do to a white man was a sin and a shame. But that was no skin off Wing Duck's neck.

Two men appeared at the street end of the gap between the buildings. The one with the black eye patch strolled on toward the bank's front door. The other stopped and rolled a smoke. His rawboned body completely blocked the narrow opening, preventing anyone from glancing in toward the side window where his skinny partner stood waiting.

Tomorrow was the Fourth of July and, from one end of Tiprock to the other, banners were stretched across the main street. Bunting fluttered on the false fronts of the stores, saloons and honkatonks. Most of the pickax wielders and the poison oakers of that whole region of the Mother Lode were in town, roistering and brawling to the wailing of fiddles and the blood-rousing rattle of castanets.

The moment his partner blocked the street end of the gap, Chopstick slid his rifle barrel over the window sill. He motioned with the gun muzzle toward the front door and his thin lips moved. But what with all the raucous racket, Wing Duck couldn't hear what he said.

After an interval just about long enough for the cashier to have unlocked the front door, Chopstick grinned at somebody in the bank and stepped aside out of the light. His partner out front disappeared. The skinny one slid back and stopped just within the alley end of the opening, ten feet or so from the tip of Wing Duck's snub nose.

The back door swung open, then closed behind the fat man who'd been waiting there. As he passed into the light, the bundle under his arm turned out to be a roll of cowhide sacks.

Every so often, Chopstick stretched his long neck like a turkey gobbler and peered both ways in the dark alley. To while away the time, he practiced up on his tobacco-juice spitting, his target being a hind leg of Wing Duck's nigh mule. Each time a bull's eye was scored, the mule squealed and the spitter chuckled. Wing Duck choked back a cackle as Chopstick stepped toward the wagon.

In keeping with Mother Lode fashions, Wing Duck's attire was an accidental assortment of nondescript garments acquired by devious ways with no thought of sartorial harmony. Among other things, he was wearing a tattered claw-hammer coat so much too large for him that it almost entirely hid his faded blue jeans. Crammed down on top of his coiled queue he had an ancient black derby hat with a ragged hole in the crown. On his feet were beaded moccasins.

These things are mentioned because with Chopstick slouching toward him, Wing Duck could feel icy fingers creeping down through the hole in his hat, icy fingers probing the toes of his moccasins, and still others exploring other vulnerable spots on his gnarled anatomy.

A step from the wagon, the

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skinny man stopped. All he wanted was to check up on the horses, and Wing Duck's covered wagon blocked his view of the shed. He tipped up on his toes, stretched his long neck and peered over the canvas wagon top, then slouched back to his lookout station.

WING DUCK settled down to enjoy this deliverance from death. But without warning his memory clicked and his happiness went to smash.

Out of long lonely years of gophering for gold pockets in the hard-rock bowels of the Mother Lode, the diminutive Chinaman had contrived to scrape together a little hoard of three thousand dollars. It was all he had in the world, all he would ever have, perhaps, to take him home in his old age to holy Haiphong. And it had just occurred to him that less than a month ago, Charley Cousins had talked him into depositing his precious savings in this very bank.

A free-for-all fight had been in progress for some little time in Bondy's honkatonk. While Wing Duck was trying to screw up his courage to deprive these bank-robbing gentlemen of their horses, the free-for-all erupted into the alley, bringing Bondy's back door and considerable of the wall with it.

Chopstick abandoned the mule's hind leg and turned his head to watch the jamboree. Wing Duck hid his little American flags, let himself down easily into the dust on the far side of the wagon, and padded softly into the blackness of the long shed.

The bandits' horses were tied to rings at the manger that ran the full length of the back wall. Wing Duck slipped between two of them. One pony snorted. Another reared. None but the blessed Buddha himself could know whether the bedlam raised by the free-for-all would muffle the snorts and the stamping.

The trembling little Chinaman had two of the horses loose when it came.

In the bank, a blast of gunfire let go.

Yells echoed hoarsely. Boots pounded. Chopstick came charging into the shed. It was tough on that skinny gentleman that the two spooked broncs Wing Duck had turned loose collided with him head on.

Wing Duck freed a third pony and pawed wildly in the dark for the halter rope of the fourth. But what with the howls and the gunfire and the thud of approaching boots, the frantic little pocket hunter lost all sense of his twin gods of calmness and order. And excitement spelled his doom.

The back door of the bank burst open. Bandits spewed out and curses mixed with gunshots. Wing Duck's line of retreat was cut off.

The desperate little Chinaman yanked madly at the last of the tie ropes, then dived for shelter into the hay in the manger.

He figured it out later that all the fiendish devils of a Chinaman's hell must have been responsible for the dire calamity that followed. But it was nothing but the large knot at the end of that last tie rope.

The frenzied horse corkscrewed on his tail and got out of there. The sad part of it was that he took the squealing Wing Duck along with him.

The tie rope had flipped around the victim's right ankle, binding behind the knot at the end. Thus it was that Wing Duck, hugging an

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armful of hay, went feet first with the plunging mustang.

It was chiefly on his shoulder blades that the little pocket hunter traveled, but part of the time it was on his belly, also on his blue jeans and the top of his head. Angry curses pursued him, bullets whined around, but due perhaps to the eternal toughness that has preserved the Chinese nation down the ages, Wing Duck took a lot of killing.

The wild-eyed horse heeled out of the alley mouth into the side street, then bolted toward the ramshackle huts of two peon families who were hunkered around a smoldering fire crooning plaintive *corridos* to the strumming of guitars. A strangled scream from a corpulent old crone warned of the oncoming avalanche.

Women and children, men and dogs, and half a dozen game roosters tied to stakes, all arose simultaneously. A hound leaped at the mustang's throat. A gamecock struck him beneath the belly; a long-haired hag hurled a chunk of firewood.

The space between the huts wasn't anywhere near wide enough but Wing Duck and the horse went through anyhow. The splintering crash slowed the bronc down a bit and Wing Duck, in his pin-wheeling, happened to land on his feet. He sprang. When they burst out back of the shacks, the Chinaman was spread-eagled on the bronc's rump, with his stringy arms locked in a death grapple around the saddle-horn. But the pony wouldn't have it.

Even at that, with all the brute's locoed bucking, Wing Duck might have made the grade except for the clothesline.

It was a wire clothesline and it took the pocket hunter just below the chin. The bronc tore on. Wing Duck stopped in the bottom of a ditch.

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A yelling mob of mounted men came surging from the side street. They circled the shacks, missed the clothesline and slashed away on the trail of the fleeing horse. Wing Duck was running.

Pain in too many places kept the little Chinaman from devoting too much thought to the hard-earned savings he had deposited in the Mother Lode Bank. Right now, all he could think of was that he had a furious urge to regain his covered wagon and light out for the hills.

His mules were still dozing beside Manning's loading platform. Wing Duck untied them and crawled painfully up on the wagon seat. Keeping to alleys and vacant lots, he got out at last on the Singing River trail.

THE rising moon turned the dark river into a wavy silver ribbon. Wing Duck gazed forlornly at the peaceful scene and breathed a sigh that began clear down in his moccasins. Then he took a rough inventory of himself. He was only dimly aware that his dilapidated old wagon was creaking and groaning.

Wing Duck's right leg felt as if it wasn't his any more. His hips were skinned. Patches of hide were missing from his shoulders and back. The whole left side of his face was bloody. But—and this seemed about worst of all—he'd lost his derby hat.

Where the trail turned into the river at Whirlpool Ford, Wing Duck pulled up. While the thirsty mules drank, he got down and gratefully gulped cool river water, then washed his face and hands and dried them on the mangled tails of his claw-hammer coat.

"Stay right like you are," a harsh voice ordered.

Wing Duck froze. His braided queue quivering, he turned his head stiffly.

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Glaring at him from beneath the canvas top on his wagon was a single glittering black eye and a black eye patch.

"Go get him, Jake!"

A rawboned man with a smirk on his pock-marked face hopped over the tailgate and started toward the little Chinaman squatted at the water's edge.

"Why, boss," he grunted, "it's a chink! You want I should hang him to yonder sycamore by his pigtail?"

The shades of all his ancestors came whispering to Wing Duck. If he once fell into the clutches of these sinister gentlemen, never more would he enjoy the fragrant whiskey concocted by the subtle Ah Quong. Like a startled hell diver, he flipped over into the river. Possibly he'd have made out better if he'd been able to swim.

"Get him!" Eye-patch leaped out of the wagon. "We dassn't lose that chink. Glom onto him, Jake!"

Jake dropped his hat and his sack of tobacco and hit the water.

Wing Duck bounced off several submerged boulders and broke the surface blowing. Jake towed him ashore by his long queue, heaved him to his feet, then batted him across the mouth hard. The little Chinaman sat down abruptly, belching water and blood.

Jake peeled off his vest and shirt and wrung some of the water out of them. "What you mean, boss—we dasn't lose the chink?" he asked. "We got the wagon, ain't we?"

"Instead of us being on the morning boat from Stockton to San Francisco, before that bank job was even discovered," the one-eyed man said tightly, "we're set afoot with forty or fifty thousand in gold and currency in strange country. This chink's our only key to the lay of the land." The black eye patch twitched. "I'd give my share of the stuff to lay hands on the coyote that stampeded our broncs."

Wing Duck stopped in the middle of a belch.

A voice came thickly from the wagon. "What you figure to do, boss?" The fat brigand threw the canvas halfway back on the wagon top. He had broken open a box and was stuffing dried apples into his loose-lipped mouth as fast as he could swallow. "Bones, here, ain't restin' so good."

Wing Duck got his moccasins under him and came up weaving. He looked around stupidly.

The skinny gentleman who'd collided with the spooked horses was stretched on his back in the wagon. Fatty reached over and shifted the cowhide sacks that kept his injured partner from rolling. Two of the sacks gave off the clink of gold. The third sack was light and bulging.

WING DUCK swallowed hard. Even through the cowhide of those sacks, it seemed he could see his hoarded three thousand dollars.

The boss speared the chinaman with that single glittering eye. "Who the devil are you? Where you headed for?"

"Name Wing Duck," the dripping little Chinaman said. "Allee same plocket hunt' by China-boy Mine. No catchem gold pletty good." He pointed across the moonlit river and away along the far bank. "Littlee way catchem cabin by China-boy. Savvy?"

He reached over the side of the wagon box and held up his handful of flags, watching them flutter in the night breeze. "Catchem Flourth

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July," he cackled. His broken lips tried to smile. "Littlee 'Melican flag pletty good, savvy?"

Jake's snaky eyes were searching the back trail. "We'd best get out of here, hadn't we, boss?"

"When them town hoodlums catch up our broncs and find the saddles empty," the boss said thoughtfully, "they'll spend the rest of the night combing the town and the brush around it. Listen." He swung on the little pocket hunter. "This where you ford the river?"

Wing Duck bobbed his head. "This Whirlpool Flord." He pointed down river to where a clump of trees overhanging the opposite bank made a dark blotch in the moonlight. "Whirlpool behind willow tlees."

"Get up on that seat," the boss ordered. "Pour leather to them mules."

The wagon was hub deep in the swirling river when the leader of the bandits spoke again. "Here's the lay," he said. He peered at a strip of frothing white water not far ahead and frowned. "We've lost our broncs and ain't likely to find none. Bones has got to have some arms and ribs set, and a place to lay up while they knit. We got to get our loot out of this country and get it out fast." He spat viciously into the black water that was beginning to boil up alongside. "You think you killed that jug-headed cashier, Jake, when he went for that stingy gun?"

"Ain't sure I even nicked him," Jake grumbled. "Wisht I had a holt of the snake that cut our mounts loose."

The wagon lurched sharply.

"There ain't but one thing to do," the boss said. "We'll go up to the chink's place. I'll put Bones in splints, and he'll have a bunk to lay in. Me and you, Jake, will light out on the mules and get the stuff to San Francisco through all hell and high water. Fat will look after Bones till he's able to travel, then they can meet up with us for the divvy. That clear?"

Fat's wicked little eyes turned stony. He bolted the dried apples he was munching and opened his mouth to speak. The boss turned his head and stared at him. Fat gulped.

"Suits me, boss," he said.

Jake smirked. "Wisht I was you, grease ball. You'll have the fun of slittin' the chink's goozle."

It was right there that Wing Duck came to a dangerous decision.

In the white water, perhaps thirty feet short of the river bank, the front wheel on the upstream side struck a hidden boulder which the little pocket hunter happened to be well acquainted with. Instead of cramping hard to the left, Wing Duck jerked hard on the right line, and brought the ends of the lines down on the mules' rumps with a report like a rifle shot.

Angry water came boiling into the wagon box. The boss cursed. The others bellowed. Wing Duck leaped as the wagon went over heavily.

Wing Duck's leap landed him on the nigh mule's shoulders. His plan was that a second leap, over the mule's head, would carry him to shallow water. But right there he learned that wet moccasins on wet mule hair don't stick.

Wing Duck had a deep and abiding reverence for his departed ancestors. But the idea of joining them, along with a wagon load of bank bandits, didn't appeal to him worth a hoot. Under water he banged into something solid and rode it to the surface like a leech.

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A wild chorus of howls and curses struck his ears. Boards were splintering. The mules were threshing and braying. Boxes, bags, tinware and crates were churning in the foaming flood. The life buoy the choking Chinaman had caught hold of felt vaguely familiar. He got a look at it, then smiled with his whole face. He hugged the keg of whiskey to his heart, shut his eyes and rode the deluge.

WHEN Wing Duck got tangled up with a couple of bloated calves, and swirling boxes and driftwood, he opened his eyes. He was spinning round and round on the surface of the whirlpool behind the willow trees. His arms were still anchored to his whiskey keg. Groggy as he was, it puzzled him to find his left hand clutching a sodden bundle of little American flags. Then the grinning face of the fat bandit snapped him out of his stupor.

Fat was afloat because it wasn't by drowning that he had died. Most likely he had taken a high dive and landed on a rock because there was a deep gash in the top of his head. But thoughtfully he had locked an arm around the cowhide sack containing currency.

Wing Duck pried the sack loose and squirmed his way through the circling mass of weeds and driftwood and drowned animals and miscellaneous junk in the sluggish whirlpool. Shoving his keg ahead of him, he towed the cowhide sack behind. The instant he crawled out on the beach, he grabbed up the sack and staggered weakly away into the brush with it.

In a few minutes he came staggering back and hoisted the keg on his shoulder. Then he slowly set it down again. Heavy thinking wrinkled his snub nose. Over his haggard little face flitted the ghost

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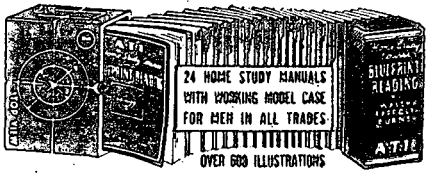

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of a smile. Then with eager movements he plunged back into the whirlpool.

When the bandit leader stole up behind him, Wing Duck was ashore again and straightening stiffly with the keg in his arms.

"Where's Fat?" the boss rasped.

The breath left Wing Duck's lungs like wind out of a punctured sack. But he hung on to his keg. And when he turned, he was again smiling.

"Boss man likem dlink?" he cackled, and tapped the keg with his chin.

The boss failed to catch it. "I got a drink all right," he said. "But that ain't a patch on what you're going to get. I asked you—where's Fat?"

"Flat man go down river 'long-side sack," Wing Duck told him.

The boss slipped a finger through the trigger guard of the carbine he'd salvaged. "Go ahead of me," he snarled. "Back to the ford. Git!"

As the bedraggled little Chinaman sidled around him, the boss planted a savage boot toe in the most convenient spot. Wing Duck gathered momentum and scampered right along.

The mules were standing with their heads down on the bank above the ford, their wet flanks heaving. Jake was on the wagon seat. He'd wrung his clothes out and was cursing his way back into them. Bones was stretched once more on the wagon bed, between the two sacks of gold coin. He was groaning dismally.

"Fat's pulled a sneak," the boss said curtly. "I knowed if he once got loose with that sack of currency he'd do a fade-out." He stabbed the half-drowned Chinaman with an ominous eye. "Which means, mister, hot irons for you in a lot of tender places."

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"He couldn't've drowned, Fat couldn't," Jake said. "Not with all of them dried apples in him. They'd've swole up like sponges and floated him high and dry. We'll catch him at the nearest eatin' house." Jake eased his shirt down past his flaring ears. "What you aim to do, boss?"

"Get Bones took care of and kill the chink," the one-eyed man said curtly. "But before we kill him, the chink can get breakfast for us. Then we'll straddle these mules and cut for sign on that fat skunk. He won't get far afoot. Pile into that wagon!"

The way the boss said it, Wing Duck knew he meant him. He set his keg in the wagon and dragged himself painfully over the side board. Bones raked him with fever-bright eyes.

"Switched your flags for a keg of vinegar, huh?"

Wing Duck bobbed his head. "Littlee flag catchem Flourth July," he cackled. "Pletty good!"

The boss climbed up to the seat and slumped down heavily, facing the rear. He laid his carbine across his knees and his glittering eye probed the trail they had come up on the far side of the river.

"Ain't a reason in the world why they'd suspicion this wagon," he growled.

Jake swung the mules into the trail winding away through willow scrub that had a dead look in the faint gray light of dawn. "Chink would lie now," he said. "But I can make out the tracks the wagon made on the way down."

BY the time the sun rose over the China-boy Mine, Wing Duck was busily beating flapjack batter in the lean-to kitchen at the north end of the tiny cabin he had built of cedar shakes split by his own hand. From the glassless window

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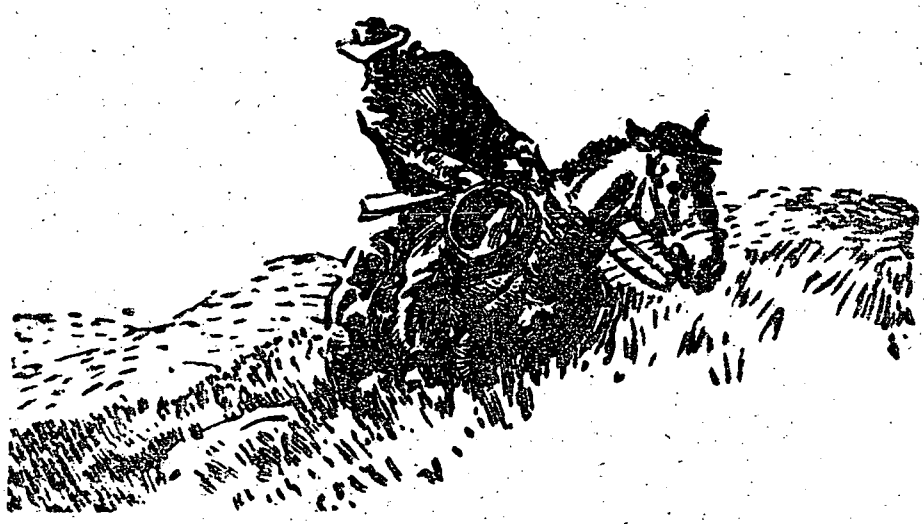
he looked out at the mouth of the tunnel marking the spot where he had begun to burrow into the shoulder of Grizzly Mountain long years ago. A cunning smile twisted the corners of his broken lips.

Bones was moaning deliriously in the bunk inside. Jake and the boss, with Wing Duck in plain sight, were humped on boxes outside the cabin door, with an upended box between them. They were playing Chinese checkers to decide which would have the fun of killing the Chinaman after they'd had breakfast, a procedure that Wing Duck himself had innocently suggested.

liquor, then looked hard at the wizened Chinaman's innocent face. "If you—" he began.

Wing Duck scurried into the cabin and out again. He filled his own tin cup from the keg and downed the contents in half a dozen gulps. He patted his belly and smacked his lips.

"Me know you not kill Wing Duck," he said confidentially. "Only makem littlee fun." He bobbed his head toward the keg. "China-boy beer for Flourth July," he cackled. "Me dlink lotta cups. Pletty good!" He went shuffling back to the kitchen.



The boss shoved backward on his box. "You always was a fool for luck," he grunted sleepily. "Soon as we've et, go ahead and kill your chink. We dasn't take a chance on him getting loose. Hi! Ain't that grub about ready?"

Wing Duck shuffled out and set his keg on the wash bench. It had a spigot now. He filled two large tin cups and passed them with a ceremonious bow. The boss sniffed a time or two at the pale yellowish

It was getting on toward midmorning when Sheriff Salt and a dozen or so of his men quietly surrounded the cabin, then rushed it. The sheriff was almost to the door when he stopped and rocked back on his heels. His men pulled up.

A chunky man wearing a black eye patch sat propped against the cabin wall, his eye patch askew and a tin cup in his lap. A lean pockmarked rascal was sprawled on his back in the dust. Between the two

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lay a carbine, a tin cup and a lot of scattered checkers. From the cabin came dismal groans.

The sheriff picked up the carbine and sniffed at the cup, then sized up the two drinkers. "Boys," he said, "if we recover the bank loot, or if we don't, we got to get Wing Duck's recipe for makin' liquor." He waggled his grizzled chin whiskers. "Do you calc'late settin' fire to these here outlaws' clothin' would liven things up any?"

After maybe fifteen minutes of prodding with boots and gun barrels, the boss bandit got his one good eye open. Jake was half an hour coming to life. Both were sullen and sick. Neither would talk, even when the two sacks of loot were unearthed from beneath the bunk inside.

Possemen were tying the prisoners and the loot on horses when Wing Duck came hobbling out of the brush with a cowhide sack on his shoulder. Sweat was running down his battered face. Gasping for breath, he bobbed his head and handed the sack to Charley Cousins, and the bank cashier hustled into the cabin.

TO the sheriff and a grinning circle of possemen, the little pocket hunter told his story. He went right through from Manning's loading platform to his scampering cross country to get the sack he'd cached near the whirlpool. He left out but one thing.

"I knowed it, boss," Jake said disgustedly. "I knowed I should of hung him by his pigtail to that sycamore tree."

The one-eyed bandit glared at the little Chinaman. "How in thunder did you get word to these law lobos?"

"I was in Manning's yesterday evening," old Andy Salt said, "when Wing Duck bought all the

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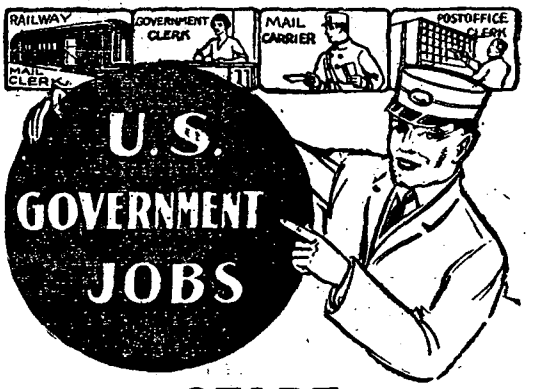

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six-inch flags there was. Me and Manning was joshing him on account of him celebratin' U. S. A. independence instead of the Chinese. So this mornin'—"

"Hey!" shouted Charley Cousins, and came hustling out. "This sack checks out three thousand dollars shy."

Wing Duck fished a small waterlogged book from inside the lining of his claw-hammer coat and handed it to Cousins.

"No likem bank no more littlee bit," he said, and smiled slyly. "Me takem tlee thousan' out. Keepem along China boy now."

Charley Cousins laughed and stuck Wing Duck's pass book in the money sack. "When we get this all straightened out," he said, "you'll have considerable more than that on deposit."

Andy Salt said, "Like I was sayin'," and looked at Jake and the boss. "This mornin' there come floatin' down the river, smack past my office window, a fat galoot with a big hole in his head. And stuck all over him was Wing Duck's American flags."

The sheriff frowned and scratched at his chin whiskers. "Dang near forgot," he said. "Here are yore flags." He reached into a saddlebag and handed a parcel to Wing Duck.

When the clatter of hoofbeats had died away, and the quiet of the wilderness brooded again over the sunburned hills, Wing Duck tacked his flags along the edge of the cabin roof, then sat down on a box with his tin cup in his hand. The colors in the Stars and the Stripes had faded a little and run together somewhat, but in the eyes of the smiling little Chinaman his flags were bright and gay.

"Flourth July pletty good!" he said blissfully, and sipped his drink.

THE END.

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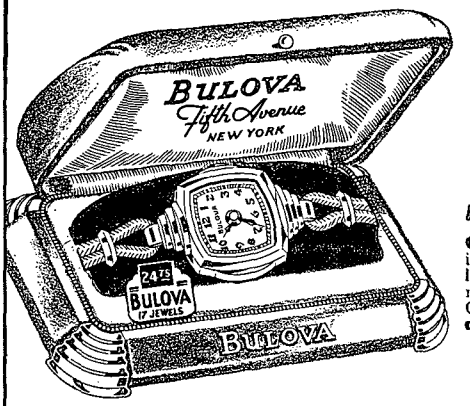

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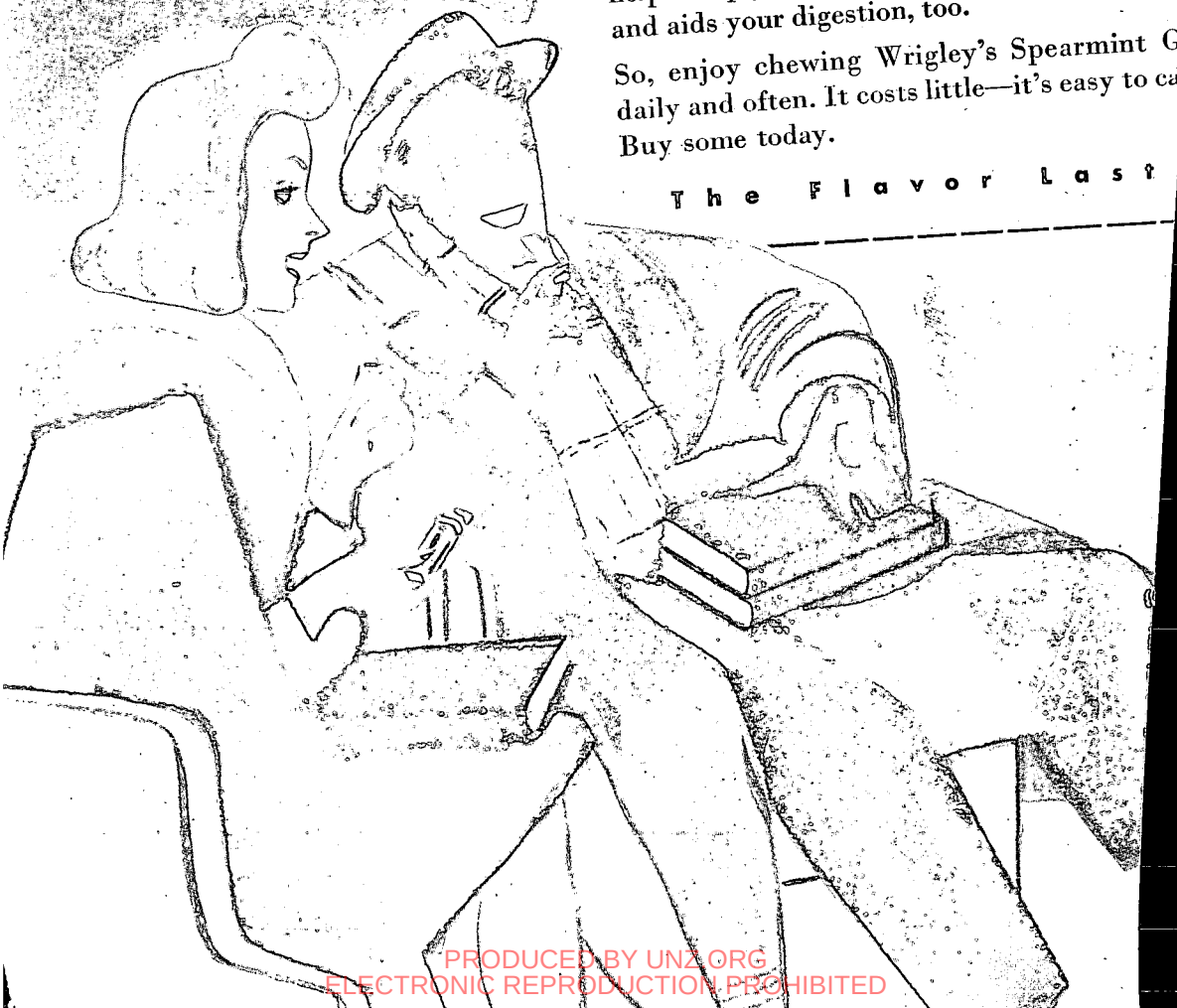

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